

Dragon's Lair by EvieSmallwood

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Relationships: Eleven & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven & Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan Byers & Joyce Byers, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Max & Billy, Max & Dustin Henderson & Lucas Sinclair, Nancy Wheeler & Jonathan Byers, Nancy Wheeler & Mike Wheeler, Steve Harrington & Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers & Eleven, Will Byers & Eleven & Dustin Henderson & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers & Jonathan Byers

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Summary:

It's 1984, and though it would appear the contrary, Hawkins is still not over the events of last autumn. Nancy and Mike grieve lost friends, while the Byers family deals with drama of their own - not to mention Hopper, who's been doing all he can to keep the mysterious reappearance of Will under wraps.

1. Chapter One

Author's Note:

Hello, all! So, I've been working on this chapter for about a month now, and I figured it was time to post it. It's a continuation of season one, based off of what we know, and my own personal theories. Expect one chapter a month, nine chapters total, to tide us over until Halloween :)

The sound of rushing water was both terrifying and deafening. He was dressed in a hazmat suit and running across the slippery causeway, panting heavily and struggling to navigate in the dark. At the far end, another figure emerged from the stairwell, soaked from head to toe. The chemist (he was a chemist, and that was all he could remember in that moment) couldn't hear and nor could the other, but they both swore under their breath, shaking.

"Shut it down!"

The chemist—his name was Jones; that came smoothly—stopped, whirling around. His face was dripping with cold water, and the air in his lungs had turned to sharp daggers. "I can't. It's too late."

"Too late for what?!" The civilian—Robert—stepped forward, shoes soaked, face scrunched as a reflex against the mists.

"All of it. Everything you wanted to prevent, it's too late. It's over."

Robert swallowed. Slowly, regretfully, he lowered his gun. There was something so pitiful and desperate about him; a lost man, a nomad, whose life was stolen from him against his will.

"You did this," he said, but he didn't sound angry or accusatory. More disappointed. Alone. "You ruined *everything*."

Jones spit. "There was nothing to ruin."

That cracked him. It was the straw that broke the camel's back. Robert lunged at Jones, and tackled him. They toppled to the ground, their jackets sopping up the water. Robert clumsily threw a punch, and it was enough to hurt, but not enough to break.

It seemed to take everything out of him, though. He rolled off of Jones and falls to his knees, a sobbing mess.

"I trusted you," he said, quietly. And then, louder, "you were supposed to *fix* her!"

Jones dabbed at the blood seeping from his nose, ignoring the guilt which stabbed him in the back—a feeling which hadn't ceased since the night before. "I—"

He didn't know what he would have said; didn't know how to repair the damage he'd made, or comfort this mourning man, because he couldn't, just as he couldn't with her. And now...

Now it didn't matter anyway, because it was over. Because he failed, just like always (just like his own father always said he would), and because even over the roaring streams, he could hear it breathing; hear the clicking of it's cracked ribs as it drew in breath. And that was enough to bring him to his feet—unsteadily, and hastily (he almost fell over again).

"Robert."

He couldn't hear even if Jones was screaming in his ear. And so he grabbed him by the collar of his coat. "We have to go. It's here."

"Don't!" Robert ripped himself away, looking drunk on grief.

That's when the lights flickered and died.

Jones sucked in a breath, listening sharply. He couldn't hear it anymore, but his heart was hammering so loudly against his chest, that might've been why. His body convulsed at the memory of breaking glass and terrified screams—of the dank, decaying smell... He waited. There was nothing aside from wind and water and fear.

With relief he closed his eyes.

Hissssss!

That's when Robert screamed, mustering his energy and running the other way. He got ten feet.

Ten feet Jones didn't have, because it was right behind him.

He closed his eyes, and all he could see was her face; hopeful and youthful and good. Her hair was floating around her, and her hands were pressed against the glass.

His bones snapped (and he could feel it for just one excruciating second)—and then his blood seeped out and joined the water.

Friends don't lie.

What you did sucks!

Gone.... gone....

ELEVEN!

With a renewing breath, her eyelids snapped open, and she clawed desperately at the ground as her throat closed up. There was nothing to hold on to. Nothing to comfort her. Her heart felt more empty than it ever had, as if the contents had spilled over and seeped away. Eleven stared up at the lights above her, needing some form of assurance that this was real. They flickered.

The air was thick with dust. Her chest was tight, and burning so badly that she whimpered. Everything began to flood back to her; how she killed it, thinking she would die, too (but if she wasn't—and she can't be, she knows that; knows what dead is: the absence of warm skin, of rushing blood, of a working mind and beating heart—then was the monster?). That was when she realised how much it hurt not to be with them. It was when it dawned on her that she was

utterly, and completely alone. She panted, hot tears falling from the corners of her eyes. She couldn't stand the brightness of the overhead bulbs, so she turned away.

"Mike," she whispered, weakly, wishing more than anything that she was capable of speaking louder. Wishing he was there with her, that he could hear her, but she knew he couldn't. He never would again.

That hurt too much. She sobbed, and it echoed off the walls a thousand times more, conveying what her body could not. Eleven pounded her first against the slimy ground.

Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong with the world around her. Everything was dark, and wet, and the ground was covered in thin, brown *things*. They even covered the walls, and they reached across the ceiling like gnarled fingers — just barely touching. The air smelt of decay and death; she knew the smell from years in the facility, when she was presented with dead bodies to revive, even though she never could.

She was staring at these tendrils, trying to discern just what they were, how they got there, when everything went black.

Eleven gasped, waiting impatiently for her eyes to adjust. When they did, she couldn't be relieved, because she knew what the darkness meant.

Bad.

She gathered her breath, and though her body was weaker than it ever had been before (even after opening the portal, and killing those men), she managed to sit up. Eleven grabbed a nearby desk for support, trying to rise to her feet. With a grunt, she managed that, at least.

She leaned over it, feeling the cool wood against her stomach, and caught her breath.

For a moment, she was somewhere else; in Mike's bedroom, she realised. Frantically she looked around her, searching desperately,

not able to focus on anything else. His bed was unmade. The supercom was tucked under his pillow, his curtains were open so that the sun (bright and warm and pretty) can shine through.

But he wasn't there. *He's not there. He's not there.*

Eleven snapped back to reality, or what she believed it must have been. The lights flickered on for a brief second, during which she could see the remains of the demogorgon floating through the air, and went out again.

Fear swallowed her whole. She mustered courage from the deepest parts of her mind and forged ahead, desperately clawing at the tables as crutches.

Weakly, she thought that if he were there, he would help her. Any of them would.

"Mike..."

She reached the doorway and leaned against it for a second, lungs crackling. El's throat felt cruddy. Within a minute, she was doubled over and coughing. Nothing came up, but the fit left her throat raw. She wiped her mouth of saliva.

Something at the end of the hall moved in the shadows. El looked up quickly and scanned the space, on the verge of panicking. *It must have left.*

Gone.

She wobbled away, toward the crevice in the wall which the demogorgon made. She could just see it, but in front of it there was something else; a mass of the darkest tendrils, coiling around some sort of...

A body. It was a body. She could see that, now, not four feet away from it.

And there, beyond it, was another. They were old and decayed,

clumps of flesh with slimy masses feeding on their skin. Eleven sobbed, deeply, the sadness nearly folding her body in two. She can feel her heart break knowing, deep down inside, that she caused this—and falls to her knees.

Ten months later.

It was night, and not for the first time Mike had fallen asleep on the sofa. The television was still on, and buzzing in a sort of comforting way that made the lull of his exhaustion more pronounced. It wasn't easy, spending long hours unable to rest because all he could think about was the one thing he couldn't have; the one thing (one person; human being) that had been unjustly taken right before his eyes.

She had faded to dust. And that hurt more than anything ever had. She had died, sacrificed herself to save them, to save Will, and... and she'd torn away a part of Mike, too. Taken a piece of him to whatever dark place she dwelled, and there was no way he would ever ask for it back. There was no way he would ever be so selfish.

He could live with it; with being partial. If it meant she could be whole.

Crickets chirped outside, barely audible through the closed windows. It was October, nearing on the end of the month, just around the time people started giving up hope.

He'd been trying, as hard as he could, to convince himself he could be strong for her — that he could be strong like her. But it was hard. It was so hard, and it hurt so much. Days felt like weeks, and his head felt like it was filled with smoke; veiled and hazy, and overgrown with tangled vines that obscured his thoughts.

He tried for his friends, to be normal. And truly, all he wanted was to be able to revert back to the way it had been before. Yet, with every passing day, that seemed more and more impossible.

It should've been the opposite. It should've been getting easier.

But it wasn't, exemplified by tonight.

She was standing just out of reach, silhouette shadowed and thin. Back bowed. Dress muddy and torn. Still the same though. And still pretty, but he wouldn't dare speak those words aloud again.

Mike took a step forward. He was hesitant this time, unlike the others. Beneath his Chucks a thin layer of water splashed, alerting her of his presence. She turned, but couldn't see him. He knew she couldn't.

She never did.

This time, something was wrong (well, everything was wrong, every time, but this was something else). She was breathing quickly. His hair stood up on end as she whirled back around, in the direction of something she couldn't see, and screamed.

"EL!"

He jolted awake, covered in a cold sheen of sweat with tears streaming out of his eyes. He angrily wiped them away and looked around him for some sort of sign that it had been real, because at least that would mean she was alive.

But there was nothing. He deflated, curling into the couch and covering his eyes, watching the last flashing remnants of the dream dance in his vision. He felt his chest tighten and his throat burn, and with a quick breath he began to cry. Alone, in the dark, feeling like the smallest thing on the planet, Mike sobbed into his arms.

She was dead and he hadn't saved her. She'd saved them, and he hadn't saved her. Useless. He was useless, and pathetic, and weak.

"Leggo my eggo!"

He looked up, frantic, but the source of the sound had only been the television.

"No, you leggo my eggo!"

Mike sniffed, drying his eyes. He slipped off of the couch and crawled over to the television set, with just enough scrounged energy and

hope to sit before it and watch the signal flicker in and out.

The sound came in again. “Leggo my eggo!”

“No, you leggo my eggo!”

And again. “Leggo my eggo!”

He leaned forward, drawn into the white flashing. He shuddered as he pressed his hand against the glass. “El?” His voice was an echo of a whisper.

“Leggo my eggo!”

He knew this commercial. He and Nancy had despised it because it came on all of the time.

Four years ago.

Why would anyone re-run a four year old commercial?

“Leggo my—”

“No, you leggo—eggo—”

His breath caught. Electricity hummed against his forehead, and his vision narrowed. “El?! El!”

“Leggo my—”

“Mission from God—”

“They’re here—”

“*Mike.*”

He gasped, just as the television crackled. He was zapped away, shaking, wide eyed, and slammed into the sofa.

The set smoked. He stared at it, chest heaving. “El...”

“Mike?”

He jumped, and for one second, dared to hope. But it was only Nancy, standing in the living room entryway, staring open mouthed at the broken TV set. “Oh my god, Mike, are you okay?!”

She was at his side in an instant, hand on his hand, searching his face. There was only fear to be found.

“Nancy,” he said, quietly. “She’s here. She’s right here.”

Vicky’s Bar, a small place near the road he went to often, was playing music, and loudly. The door opened, and Billy stumbled out; everything was too much for his headache. He took his cigarette, hanging from his lips, and exhaled the built up smoke in his lungs, swaying on the spot.

“What’re you doing, Billy?” came the equally intoxicated and far more obnoxious voice of his date (or mistake), Carol. She giggled, stumbling down the steps toward him, and he gruffly pushed her against the wall once she was in reach.

“Billy,” she said, dazed and smiling, “what are you doing?”

He sighed. “He make you happy? That asshole you’ve been seeing?”

Carol snorted. “You mean Tommy, the guy I’ve been dating since sixth grade? Yeah. I guess. And he’s not the asshole, anyway.”

“But that isn’t an answer.” Billy grinned down at her, feeling triumphant. His heart pounded with exhilaration.

“Do you need one?”

He shook his head and leaned down to kiss her, doing so forcefully—and at first he could feel her struggling underneath his pinned grip, but eventually she relaxed and reciprocated, like they always did.

Carol drew back quickly, though. “I didn’t ask you to—”

“Didn’t tell me not to either, Carol.” He leaned down and kissed her again. She bit down on his lip, and damn hard. “Argh! What the hell?!”

Carol glared up at him. She stole the cig from his fingers and took a drag. He, fed up, wiped the blood from his lower lips and leaned against the wall next to her. They looked at the darkened road, crickets chirping loudly around them.

“You ever just get tired of this?”

Billy glanced over, uninterested. “Of what?”

“This!” she said, gesturing around them. “Hawkins, your family — I don’t know—”

He rolled his eyes, because out of all of the chicks he’d been with, Carol was by far the most high maintenance (which annoyed him, since he was aiming for the opposite after Cindy). “Are you gonna kill yourself, or something?”

Cindy was always trying shit like that.

She scoffed. “You couldn’t handle baggage like that on your best day.”

“Not a chance in hell,” he replied, grinning, and sucked in another long bought of smoke (the kind that made your cheeks go gaunt and your skin sallow within seconds).

Carol shook her head with disgust. “Screw you.” She started to walk away, red mane swinging and glowing in the light, but he grabbed her arm. He couldn’t pass up something so good and easy.

“Come on, I was only playing—”

Carol ripped her arm out of his grasp and whirled around, hair flying. “Of course you were. That’s all life is to you. ‘Just playing.’ Why don’t you go back to your card game, Billy? It’s what you do best.”

Billy jerked back and turned with exasperation. Carol stumbled off

the curb. She walked away from him, nearly tripping on her high heel. "You're an asshole!"

"Yeah, yeah... You walking!?"

"I'd rather take the bus than ride with a jackass like you!" she called back.

Billy fumed. *Stuck up, entitled little...* "Fine! Bitch."

Carol kept walking, stepping up onto the sidewalk. Billy lit up again, and watchf the road some more, but there was never much to see. "See you Friday?" he called, loudly.

"Whatever."

He stared after her, a little disappointed, and took another long drag. Then he turned back to his car (a black camaro he got from his dead dad). He walked over to it, ground wet beneath his feet, and unlocked the vehicle with numb fingers. The streetlight above him flickered suddenly. Looking up and rolling his eyes, Billy slipped into his car, mind full of bitter thoughts and ramblings. He flicked the butt of his cig into the grass without a second thought. As he drove away, the embers of his abandoned cigarette glowed and died out.

Carol walked on, path not perfectly straight, but she wasn't stumbling. She felt proud of that, for some reason. When she heard the crunching of leaves behind her, she turned, exasperated, and then screamed.

Running is useless when there's nowhere to go.

In the early hours of the morning, Joyce got to be alone. She got to watch the sun rise, a cup of coffee in hand, and listen to the birds. That was the time where her thoughts came to her, and she could sort them one by one.

She didn't have to worry, yet. Once she'd checked on the boys as assured herself that they were fine, she was free to relax. Free to

wait.

In the early hours of the morning, Will had to be alone. He lay in his bed, curled up in a ball, quilt wrapped around his shoulders even if it wasn't cold. He still shivered, skin like ice and blood like water. He couldn't think straight, and most times, he was blind—stumbling through a maze of vines and darkness.

In the early hours of the morning, Jonathan needed to be alone. He needed those moments, headphones blasting sound in his ears, to remember who he was. Remember that he wasn't a monster hunter, or a broken brother, or a friend by chance—he was Jonathan Byers, seventeen, and he liked taking photos. That was it.

Joyce cracked an egg on the frying pan and watched it bubble. It had been a while since she'd done this; made breakfast for her boys. But Jonathan had been so overworked lately. He can use the break, which she was more than willing to provide.

Outside, Chester barked and ran to his heart's content. She had put food out for him, but he hadn't touched it. Maybe no one had an appetite this morning.

She heard the sound of an engine running. Through the screen door she could see Bob's car pulling up. Quickly she tied her robe shut and lowered the heat on the egg. Bob was getting out of his car by the time she was out the door.

"Bob! What – what're you doing here... so early?"

The question came out weakly as soon as she saw the flowers. "It's our sixth month anniversary!" He announced, sounding happier than he has in a while, which relieves her; the stress of work, and his father's illness had been eating him alive.

Joyce raised her eyebrows, taking the bouquet. It was only daisies. Nothing special. Not a big deal. She smiled as best as she could, because he was sweet and he was trying, despite everything. "I forgot. I'm sorry."

“No, it’s fine, really,” Bob leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her cheek. She could barely feel it for the embarrassed blush heating her face. “Joyce?”

“Uh - yeah?”

“Your breakfast—I think it’s burning.”

She gasped. “Oh, shit!” Joyce ran back inside and yanked the pan off of the stove. She cooled it off in the sink. “Jonathan!”

Jonathan flicked his music off and stumbled out of bed at the sound of his mother’s voice. He pulled on his pants, still out of sorts, and made his way to the kitchen. “You call me?”

His mom was leaning against the counter, a cup of coffee in hand. Bob was there (*Bob. God.*), and there was a thin layer of smoke in the air. “You’re gonna have to pick up breakfast at the diner,” his mom said. “I uh...”

“Burnt something,” Jonathan finished for her, smiling a little. “Yeah, I could tell.”

Joyce sighed. “Get Will up, please?”

“I’m up,” said a small voice from behind them. Jonathan’s body relaxed, as it did every morning after he discovered Will alive, and safe. “What’s for breakfast?”

“I’ll make you some toast, kiddo,” offered Bob — *God. Bob.*

Jonathan rolled his eyes and went back to his room, unable to pretend to be okay any longer.

Will rummaged through his drawers, the early dawn light shining through the window above them, causing him to squint. He couldn’t

find a shirt that wasn't wrinkled, and if he didn't, he would be even more weird than he already was. Tears began to form in his eyes, but they didn't fall. This wasn't enough to break him.

Maybe nothing was.

He started to cough—hard, heaving, rib-cracking coughs that couldn't be heard over Jonathan's music (thank god). Will bent over, and eventually fell to his knees, unable to breathe. It hurt *so much*, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't quite think of anything he'd done to deserve this. He'd tried to be good all of his life, but now, good and bad are a thin line clouded with misery.

Blood splattered onto his shirt. Will gasped, drawing in the now accessible air and letting it fill his lungs. He rolled onto his back and watched the dust float around in the light. It wasn't the same, he told himself. *Not the Upside Down. It's home; it's Hawkins.*

Hesitantly he looked down at his hand, within which he knew there would be something. He could feel it moving.

Palm open, Will stared at the small, round, black thing in his fingers. It was surrounded by blood. That was when it dawned upon him that they weee all right; he was a freak. An absolute weirdo. And he would never be normal again — especially not with whatever it is growing inside of him...

Will felt a hot tear roll down his cheek.

The glass slammed down onto the red linoleum counter, orange juice flecks flying halphasardly. Nancy scowled down at Billy, who glanced up lazily from the morning paper he was pretending to read.

“Bad morning?”

“Go to hell,” she snapped testily, and moved onto clearing the next table. It was an easy task; Nancy didn't mind the work. In fact, she loved being a waitress. Or had, until Billy'd started coming in.

He was nice at first. And then she'd discovered that he was a major douchebag after less than ten minutes in his company.

Now he wouldn't leave her alone, as though he was obsessed with her; constantly fixating on her at school, here...

She placed the cups and plates into her bin and then wiped down the counter.

"You got any ketchup?"

He was the only customer there (aside from an old man eating bacon in the corner), and they both had school in an hour. Nancy grabbed the ketchup bottle and slammed that down in front of him, too.

"You're gonna break it, one of these days."

Nancy rounded on him, unable to contain her irritation another minute. "No, Billy. One of these days, I'm gonna break *you*."

It wasn't something she would normally say—as a matter of fact, it was so out of her regular vocabulary that the old man drops his bacon and stared at her in shock—but she didn't care. She couldn't care, anymore. Ever since last November, it had just been so difficult to give a shit about anything. But Billy smirked it off, as he did with everything (bad grades, mouthing off in class, making his little sister upset), which only infuriated her more.

Outside, a honking sounded. Nancy was relieved when she looked through the slightly foggy window and found Jonathan's car waiting for her.

She went into the back and checked her time card, slipping off her apron and grabbing her coat. In less than a minute she was running out the exit, bag flying, with a crinkly sack of doughnuts under her arm.

Jonathan opened the car door for her. Nancy slipped in, shivering from the cold (the uniform only reached her knees, and that was just barely). "They should allow leggings past October," she snapped.

Jonathan flicked on the radio. "You could just get a job somewhere else."

She gave him a sideways look, because that was the third time he'd said something along those lines (he really, really hated Billy—but so did everyone else). "Did you get my stuff?"

"Yeah. You get mine?" He gestured toward the back seat, where her backpack was waiting. They exchanged items (pastries for school books) and then he drove.

Nancy rummaged through her backpack, pulling out her sweater and jeans. "Pull over in that alleyway."

At that, Jonathan looked away from the road and toward her, like she was insane. "What?"

"So I can change," she said, as though it was obvious. "Come on, we don't have time. It's not like it's anything you haven't seen before."

"I thought that—"

"Jonathan, I'm serious. I can't be late for Calc again."

He sighed and pulled into the next alley, face slightly ashen. Nancy started to unbutton her uniform, and he pointedly looked away, covering his eyes.

"You're ridiculous," she said.

"You have a boyfriend," he retorted.

Nancy pulled her sweater on, struggling with the small space, and glared at him. "I wasn't suggesting you look at me, you're just... making a big deal about nothing."

She suddenly felt insecure, sitting there in her shorts. Goosebumps formed on her thighs.

"My point is," Jonathan began, gesturing for her to hurry up, "Steve would probably kick my ass."

Nancy pulled her pants up, bony back popping. "You already proved you could kick his ass, so stop worrying. And you can look now."

Jonathan turned to her, and not for the first time she felt her stomach drop. The sun seemed to burn brighter for just a second, before her own bitterness clouded it. Jonathan swallowed. "You look great," he offered, halfheartedly.

"My hair is a mess," Nancy retorted, doing her best to fix her appearance in the mirror.

She felt something—his hand—tucking a strand of it behind her ear. "Still looks good."

She rolled her eyes and quickly kissed his cheek in gratitude (she'd been trying to do it more, to get him to understand that she cared about him just as much as she cared about Steve—but also out of regret for being a consistent bitch who asked so much of him). "Just drive, okay?"

He nodded. Nancy could tell she'd done something to him. She didn't know how to feel about that, and so she turned up the music to fill the silence. Jonathan backed out of the alley, and just as he was about to merge, a black camaro zoomed by. He slammed on the breaks, and they jerked forward.

"Asshole!" Nancy slammed her hand on the ceiling, incensed.

"Calm down, it's fine," Jonathan waited for cars to pass.

Nancy rounded on him. "Are you serious?! It isn't okay, he's a total dick! He treats Max like shit, and he's *always* late picking her up, he's *drunk* sometimes, and how he isn't failing out of school is beyond me—"

"Nance, I know," he glanced at her, now on the road. "Just... I've heard things, okay?"

Skeptical, she folded her arms across her chest. "Heard what?"

"That he... hurts people. People he doesn't like, people who stand up to him."

Her blood ran cold, because all she could see was a tough-bred redhead who never backed down from a challenge, yelled half of the things that came out of her mouth, and cared too much. "Like Max," she said bitterly.

"Maybe not—"

"She lives with him. They're not even full siblings, so I'm sure he'd have no trouble being terrible to her. This is *Billy* we're talking about. God, I have to get her out of that house."

Jonathan didn't say anything more, and so she looked away, staring forlornly out of the car window. That was when they passed the RadioShack, and it dawned on her that she hadn't told him (*Jesus, she hadn't told either of them*). She was up so late with Mike last night, comforting him, she couldn't think straight anymore. "Oh my god, Jonathan!"

He swerved. "What?! Jesus, what?"

Suddenly she couldn't get the words out; her head was full of television static and Mike's terrified face, of the word they'd both heard together. "I... oh my god, I can't believe... something happened, okay? Something important. I can't tell you now, just keep going."

Jonathan frowned. "Why not? I mean, if it's that serious—"

"It is, I swear, it's just..." she glanced around, heavily aware (as Hopper had warned them countless times) that the car could be tapped. "I'll tell you later."

He didn't like it. She knew he doesn't like it. But he didn't protest, thank god.

Hopper was in his cruiser, a cigarette dangling from his lips. Smoke filled the bitter autumn air. He was parked around the corner from the Wheeler house, but it was still visible to him; he'd been watching since dawn, eyes following Nancy as she slipped into Harrington's car. Ted'd already left for the morning, and Hopper had watched him go, too, after the asshole dropped his keys not once, but twice.

He'd been keeping tabs on their houses for a while now. Rotating every day. Sinclair, Henderson, Wheeler, Byers, Holland... no one showed up. No one ever made a peep.

No one had been asking questions, either. Not since around February. It was as if they'd all forgotten something happened. How easy it must have been for all of them. How... *convenient*.

He stopped himself there, because those are the kinds of thoughts he'd harboured after Sara; that questioning of the world—of its rights and wrongs. That bitterness over her dying and him surviving. He couldn't think like that, because it was better this all happened to them, to him, and not someone else. Someone who couldn't handle it.

Sometimes it felt like they never really did though—handle it. At three a.m. when he held an orange bottle in one hand and a clear one in the other, with his throat burning to match his eyes, nothing was *handled*. Nothing was *fixed*.

The kid came out, dragging along his bike, and Hopper leaned forward. He looked worn, and more than usual. It startled him, because for a few months there, the boy had seemed to be improving. Hopper contemplated talking to him, but he couldn't; the boy'd never listen. He can't be blamed, though, either. It wasn't like this hadn't been coming.

Hopper took another puff from his cigarette and then stretched forward, snuffing it out on his dashboard ashtray. The leather seat creaked beneath his weight. He sighed out the last of the smoke as his radio crackled.

“Chief?”

It was Powell. Hopper cleared his throat, wishing he had a beer to wash this down, but there was only coffee.

"Yeah?"

"We got a situation, sir."

Hopper glared out the window. One day, he swore on his life, he'd teach these assholes how to be clear. "What is it, Powell?"

"Blood, chief. And a whole lot of it."

They were biking down the road, he and Lucas (who was jabbering on about Max and some new sci-fi program). It was moments like these when Mike realised that wind was a mercy—and not just because of his friend. In the back of his mind, all he could hear was the buzz of the television and her voice, and he didn't know what to think.

Nancy had stayed up with him; slept on his top bunk, gave him hollow condolences, and offered him no guidance. He didn't know who to go to, or who to trust. Mike glanced at Lucas. "Lucas, last night, something—"

"Mike, look out!"

His head jerked around, and suddenly he was slamming on his breaks, swerving, heart pounding against his chest. He went off the road and into the tall weeds beside it, leaves crunching beneath him. Lucas came over and helped him out of the grass, dusting off his jacket. "Oh my god, I thought you were dead, for sure. You okay, man?"

"Yeah," Mike said, shakily. "Yeah, I'm fine." No El to save him this time. "Was that—?"

"Chester," Lucas confirmed resentfully. He glares at the direction the dog ran off, after barking and wagging its tail.

"Should we go after him, do you think?"

"No way. There's like, a ninety percent chance that mutt has rabies," he mounted his bike, and so Mike did the same. "We'll tell Will, when we get to school, but I really don't wanna be late again. You sure you're good?"

"Yeah, come on."

Mike peddled forward, and they zoomed down a slope.

He watched the trees slip by in an endless blur. The blood seemed like ages ago. Will slipped out of his mother's car, eager to get away from her pointless banter with Bob. He'd never minded Bob—not really—but he got old after a while in a weird way. Like he tried too hard to be... normal.

"Have a good day, honey," his mother called, smiling from the driver's seat.

Will swallowed down his growing nausea and nodded. "Sure," he said, slightly breathless. "You too."

He shut the door, and waited for the car to drive off before turning toward the school. It was only two-hundred feet from the drop-off to the science classroom. Even that made him feel sick. People fanned out all around him, avoiding him, but he didn't question it anymore. Who wouldn't stay away from him?

He couldn't blame them; he'd been 'dead' a few days, after all. The Boy Who Came Back To Life, they called him. Will wasn't sure how to feel about that, but he knew how they felt, and now he was only an outsider.

"Will,"

A hand came down on his shoulder. He jumps, but it was only Max, Dustin behind her. "You're late," she said, eyebrows raised. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah," Will nodded, trying to smile. It was painful, and his face felt stretched. "Mom burnt the eggs."

The other boys joined them. Mike shouldered his backpack awkwardly, frowning. "Did you eat?"

He'd been looking out for Will in a way that the others hadn't; asking about his eating habits, his sleeping patterns, and talking to him more than he used to. It wasn't weird, or awkward, but it had been unexpected. Deep down, he knew why it was happening, too; knows wha Mike doesn't.

"Toast," Will replied promptly. "C'mon, we'll be late for class."

The walked on. Mike lagged behind them a little, as per usual, with his head bent toward the asphalt. Will kept pace with him. "You alright?"

"Yeah," Mike swallowed and smiled in a way that was obviously forced. His face was drawn, and there were bags beneath his eyes. "Yeah, totally. Listen, I was thinking you and Dustin could come over later—finish making our costumes and stuff."

Will nodded. "I'll tell my mom. But Lucas—"

"His mom bought him one," Mike replied, sounding a little bitter.

"Darn right!" Lucas said, having overheard. "It's got zippers, and the gun looks crazy. You guys are totally gonna flip!"

Max scoffed. "You're ridiculous, Lucas."

"What's so ridiculous about trick-or-treating in style?"

"You're thirteen. Trick or treating at all should be a no-go."

Lucas deflated. "So you're not coming?"

"I never said that," Max countered. "It would just take a lot of convincing."

Mike rolled his eyes at them. "So, I nearly killed your dog. Sorry

about that."

Will glanced over, frowning at him as they joined the line of at least a dozen more students waiting to enter the science classroom. "What do you mean?"

"Chester got out," Mike said, squinting in the sunlight.

"Huh. He was chained up this morning..." Will tried to think of a way he could have gotten out. "Maybe Mom let him off or something."

"I can help you look later, if you're worried."

Will shook his head. "It's happened before. He always gets hungry and comes back."

"Oh my god, Will, I forgot—" Dustin turned around to face him, grinning, "I have this game I want to try on Atari — think Bob could hook me up?"

Will rolled his eyes. They did that a lot; asked Bob for games to 'demo'. The guy never seemed to mind; in fact, he'd always pretty happy to loan them cool stuff, but it was getting out of hand, especially to Will, who was the only one with any leverage to call in favours.

"Sure," Will said. They walked into Mr. Clarke's science classroom. Will's favourite teacher was standing behind his desk, writing the homework down on the chalkboard. He was humming under his breath—*Dream A Little Dream Of Me*—and winked at Will like he did every morning.

Mike sat next to Will, Lucas paired with Dustin, and Max sat in the back with Jennifer Hayes, who caught Will's eye and smiled as always. Will smiled back, feeling comforted at the thought of a good secret for once. Mike pulled out his book. "So Lucas totally has a thing for Max," he said, voice low.

Will smirked. "So does Dustin."

That took him by surprise. "What? No way."

“I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: you’re totally oblivious, man.”

Mike nudged him. “Am not. How do you know, anyway, if you’re so observant?”

Will began taking notes. “They’re constantly trying to impress her. And they’re both staring at her all the time—oh my god, last week at the movies, when you weren’t looking, Lucas literally flipped Dustin off.”

“Wait, *what?*”

Mr. Clarke started calling role. “Yeah. I mean, I *think* he did. He could have just been readjusting his straw.”

Mike’s brow furrowed. “But they seem totally cool with each other.”

“It’s good natured competition,” Will replied with a shrug. “Did you get your homework done?”

Mike nodded, and pulled out his binder — a Trapper Keeper, the same one they all had—and rummaged through it. “Damn it,” he hissed. “I didn’t bring it.”

“That’s okay. I mean, it’s not like Mr. Clarke is gonna mark you off ___”

“Today, class, we’ll be dissecting slugs!”

They both look up at the same time — Mike with pure ecstasy, and Will in terror. *A slug. Why does it have to be a slug? I see enough of those already.*

Mr. Clarke started passing around the molluscs, and Will had to swallow back bile when he got his. Mike started poking it with the pencil, grinning. “This is the best thing that’s happened all week.”

“Yeah,” Will lied, weakly, “totally.”

Steve waited by the lockers, fiddling nervously with his keys. The bell rang, and students slammed their lockers, rushing past to get to their classes. Steve kept his eye on the doorway, through which he could see the parking lot clearly; the trees were swaying in a slight breeze—orange, gold, and brown leaves rustling pleasantly. Light poured through onto the tiles.

He pushed off the wall as a car pulled up—Jonathan's Ford. Steve suppressed the small sting of envy he felt at the sight of his girlfriend and... *former enemy* exiting the vehicle. Nancy looked thin, with rumpled clothes and haphazardly fixed hair. Her school books were spilling out of her bag. Steve watched her, concerned. Jonathan walked beside her, making her laugh with some comment he couldn't hear.

He wouldn't let it show. He never did; he wouldn't do that to Nancy—especially after the way she'd been acting lately. He thought—well, he knew, but Nancy was so unpredictable it had become almost exhausting—it was because they were nearing upon the year anniversary of the events of last November. Of Barb's death. But she had become a recluse when school had begun, holing herself up in her room and studying for hours.

Nancy kept her head down as she walked up to him. She didn't greet him, or even look at him. "I have class," she said, rushed, and breezed past them both.

Jonathan swallowed, hands in his pockets, and Steve stared him down (trying to look impassive while doing it). "Something happen?"

"Uh... no."

Jonathan met Steve's eyes. "I don't think she got a lot of sleep, so..."

Steve nodded thoughtfully. "Been happening a lot." He cocks his head, a sly grin contorting his features. "You wouldn't have anything to do with that, would you, Byers?"

Jonathan shook his head, eyes narrowed. He looked disgusted, as per

usual when it came to Steve's humour. "You're a dick, you know that?"

Steve leaned against the wall, nonchalant. "You've told me once or twice, yeah."

"She's going through a lot right now—don't you get that? She's working, and applying for colleges, and trying to keep an eye on her brother—"

"I know!" Steve shoot back, unable to take Byers and his pretentious high-horse any longer. "Who do you think helps her study? Convinces her to eat? Are you there when she's crying her eyes out at two a.m.?!"

Jonathan's breath was quickening, and his cheeks turned red. "Are you... are you seriously keeping her up with that shit?"

Steve realised what he was getting at, and looked away. "Listen man, I'm not always the instigator—"

"I-*I do not* want to hear about that," Jonathan backed away a few paces. "Jesus. Just—let her sleep from now on, alright? She needs it."

Steve stared at him for a moment, wondering if he should bring up her and Jonathan's little midnight escapades to the forest, but he didn't, because Nancy always came back smiling; always came back looking like... like the Nancy he knew last November, before all of this shit went down. "Yeah," he said instead. "Yeah, whatever."

Jonathan looked pissed, but he didn't speak again. Instead he walked back toward the parking lot.

"Hey! Don't you have class?"

"Free periods till lunch," Jonathan called back, and he looked like he was gloating. *Yeah, he's definitely gloating.*

Steve shook his head, fighting a rebellious grin. "Jackass." He then scooped up his bag and rushed off to English.

It was on Mirkwood. Even if he'd really heard it, he still couldn't believe it—didn't *want* to believe it. They were by the road, and Hopper was only pulling up when he decided he didn't like the look of it. Callahan and Powell had the dogs, which nosed around the area on long leads. Hopper got out of his truck, one hand on his gun, and walked over.

"What've you got?"

"Like I said, nothing more, nothing less," Powell looked grimly at Hopper. "Blood, chief. On the road, on the trees... still haven't found the end of the trail."

Hopper scowled. They hadn't had shit like this in the city, and if it weren't for those kids—if it weren't for *Joyce*—he would have been back there right then, in an apartment that didn't feel like home, that at least gave him some form of peace.

Then again, the city was loud, and the air here was more than clear.

Hopper sighed. He brushed past the deputies, ducking his head to avoid hitting a branch as he entered the forest. He could see it, plain as day. Blood, everywhere. Smeared and splattered. "Jesus," he muttered.

"Looks like someone was murdered," Callahan assessed.

Powell gave him a sideways glance. "You think?"

Hopper held up his hand, staring at the ground intently. He crouched down, fingers just brushing the red marks on the trunk of a pine tree. He thumbed them. A hand print.

"Hey chief," began Callahan, as they walked through, "you don't think this has anything to do with that Byers kid, do you?"

Hopper stopped short. His heart was hammering against his ribcage as he glowered down at the younger man. "No," he said, deadly calm and deadly serious, "and neither do you."

Callahan managed a weak reply.

“Come on, let’s go.”

He walked on, but the two stayed back. Frustrated, Hopper called again. “Let’s go!”

The slug writhed around in its own slime, feeling around with its eyes. Will stared at his hands, which were folded in his lap, instead of paying it any attention. *If I don’t look, it isn’t there.*

Mike was fully geared, wearing goggles and gloves, and a scalpel in hand. He didn’t notice that something was wrong with Will until his friend moaned lightly, curiosity getting the better of him when he peeked just in time to see Mike cut along its back.

Mike frowned. “Will?”

“Ooo, it’s gooey,” Lucas muttered from behind them.

Dustin grinned. “This is so great.”

Mr. Clarke approached them, smiling. “Now, remember, boys—each slug has two sets of tentacles; one for smelling, and one for sensing light. Can anyone tell me which is which?”

Max’s hand shot up from the back. “Ms. Jones!”

“Lower pair is for smelling, and the upper is for light. But I can’t see the second pair here... they can retract, right?”

“That’s right,” Mr. Clarke went over to her for further guidance, grinning eagerly.

Mike glanced at Will, apparently unnerved, which only made Will feel worse. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Will nodded, taking up his own scalpel, but it wasn’t very convincing given the shaking of his hands and the nervous flutter in his stomach causing his breathing to increase. He forced himself not to think about it. He wouldn’t. If he did, he would be back there—and that had never happened in the middle of class before.

“Will!”

He hadn’t seen the cut until Mike grabbed his hand and removed the sharp instrument from it. They both stared at the gathering pool of blood. Will couldn’t even feel it.

Mr. Clarke rushed over. “What happened —? Oh, I see...” He gingerly took Will’s hand. “You didn’t use it before you cut yourself, did you?”

Will shook his head, unable to speak.

“It’s alright, kiddo. Just head on over to the nurse’s office, and she’ll fix it right up.” Mr. Clarke smiled as though he’d actually solved the problem—which, if it weren’t so large, so prevalent, he might actually have.

Will shakily slid off of his stool, blotting up the blood with his jacket sleeve. “Anyone want to accompany Mr. Byers to the nurse’s office?”

No one volunteered. Of course not.

Then Max, throwing Jennifer a dirty look, came over. “I will,” she said.

Dustin stumbled off his chair. “Me too!”

Will didn’t have the attention span to care who was with him. He forged ahead, biting his own tongue to keep from gagging. The iron taste of blood filled his mouth, and he swallowed that down. It only made everything worse.

“Will, dude,” Dustin stopped him in the middle of the hall (they’d walked farther than he’d realised), “nurse’s office is back there.”

Will felt his face heat up. His eyes blurred with tears. Dustin and Max exchanged glances. “Will?” She frowned. “Will, are you okay?”

He shook his head, and for one brief second he wasn’t there at all. *He can’t see. He can’t see anything, but he can feel the heat all around him — he can hear the crackling and popping of fire (or is it thunder?) and suddenly a blast of bright red light is shining upon him like a beacon straight from hell—*

“Will!”

Dustin was shaking his shoulders. The hallway came back into focus. He felt so weak he worried he might actually fall to his knees, and so he grabbed Dustin for support. “I need to call my mom,” Will said, desperate. “I need to go home.”

“The nearest payphone is like two blocks from here,” Max said. “I can go, but I’d need to go now—”

“No, don’t bother, it’s totally cool.” Dustin took Will by the arm, somehow understanding, and rushed through the maze of classrooms, bright posters, and lockers. “AV club, remember? Your mom have your walkie on her?”

“I leave it in the car,” Will said.

There was a chance. A small one, maybe, but a chance at least, that she would hear the message—and he couldn’t wait for Max to skateboard two blocks.

Dustin tried the knob for the AV room, but it was locked. Will’s heart sank. He rested his forehead against the cool wall to keep from crying out at the heat surrounding his body. Gasping, he stripped off his coat.

Max took a pin out of her hair with an uneasy glance at him. “I got this,” she said. Within seconds, she’d picked the lock. Dustin stared at her in sheer awe. “Dude! Will!”

“Right!”

They rushed in together.

The walkie was lying abandoned on the dashboard, antenna down. The car, parked in front of the RadioShack, was filled with static.

“Mrs. Byers?! Mrs. Byers, are you there?”

Joyce, outside the Pinto, was struggling with finding her keys. She groaned with frustration. “Where the hell are they?!”

“Mrs. Byers, this is serious!”

With a grin she found them in her back pocket and unlocked her car, cold hands shaking slightly. She’d be able to turn on the heater, and then clean out the kitchen once she got home—”

“MRS. BYERS!”

Joyce jumped as she shut the car door, and nearly slammed it on her pinky. The sound of Dustin Henderson’s unexpected voice was coming from the walkie on the dashboard. Joyce grabbed it, frantic, heart sinking.

Please tell me he’s okay, please tell me he’s okay, please tell me he’s okay...

“Yeah, yeah, I’m here — why—?”

“Something is wrong with Will. We need you to get here. *Now.*”

They waited on the curb. Will was shaking. It wasn’t cold enough for it, but his breath was cloudy . Dustin was fiddling with his headset while Max watched for the car.

That was when he wretched for the first time, too weak to hold it back. Nothing came up. He was relieved, but it was followed not by

mercy but a sharp pain in his gut. He groaned in misery, wanting nothing more than to scream, but he couldn't.

There was fire around them them—all around them. Will was screaming, now, truly, but they didn't seem to see it. How could they not notice the flames dancing across their skin?!

And then he realised: they weren't flames. They were tendrils, surrounded by glowing orange light. And there, there up in the sky... he was looking right at it, unable to breathe, why couldn't they see it too? It was breaking the clouds. It was emerging, and—

“Hey! Will! Will, honey...”

—and lightning flashed across the firmament, creating cracks in an image of grotesque serenity—

“Will! *Stop!*”

He looked away from it, almost unable to, and saw his mother.

And then he was crying. Will collapsed into his mother's arms, ignoring Max's concerned face, and Dustin's expression of confusion. Joyce held him close enough to feel her heart beat, and it matched his own in that it was erratic and full of pain.

“We have to go,” she told him, but he already knew it. “It's gonna be okay, I promise. Come on, baby.”

The next thing he knew, they were turning off of Mirkwood and heading to the National Lab.

Nancy was walking down the sidewalk, alone, because it was what she needed. Just her, and the memory of her best friend—not Steve. Not Jonathan.

Tears were falling onto the pavement. She did her best to dry them, but it was no use; all she could think about was Barb; about the way she was once living, once breathing, and how she's gone (*gone...*

gone...).

She was gone. And it was Nancy's fault. If it hadn't been for that stupid pool party and her selfish insistence that Barb come along...

"I'm sorry," she whispered, but of course no one heard.

The sound of an engine running made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Nancy turned, expecting to see Jonathan or Steve's vehicles, but it was neither.

A black Camaro was parked not ten feet away, and though she couldn't see his face, she knew Billy Jones sat within.

She wouldn't take the chance. Nancy ran, as fast as she could, but he was following her and she knew it. She could feel it.

She cut down Maple, and stumbled away from the main road into the forest. That didn't stop him. She heard a car door slam, and the leaves behind her rustle. Nancy pushed aside branches and stumbled down slopes, breath catching in her throat; hot tears blurring her vision.

She snuck a look. He was there, in his leather jacket, with a gun in hand. "Why are you running from me, Nancy Wheeler?"

Nancy gasped, because suddenly she wasn't on her feet anymore, but her back, staring up at Billy as he towered over her, a sick smile contorting his features.

This is why I shouldn't have stopped bringing my gun to school.

"What the hell do you want?!"

"You know I only wanted one thing," he squatted down beside her. "And now, I'm gonna get it."

Like hell.

Nancy mustered up all of her ninety-nine pound strength and tackled

him, managing to get him on his back, and they struggled for the gun. “Just... let it... go!”

She freed the firearm from his grasp and ripped herself away from him, weapon in hand and ready.

“You don’t even know how to use that thing,” he stated, confidence lacing his tone. He seemed almost relaxed.

That time, Nancy didn’t have to feign her confidence. “Try me.” She fired a warning shot at the tree and then zeroed back in on his chest. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t kill you right here, right now.”

He didn’t speak, but it didn’t matter anyway, because behind them the leaves rustled in a way that could never have been the wind. Nancy glanced wildly around her, and found a smear of blood on the back of her hand.

Billy’s nose was bleeding.

Nancy swallowed. “I have to go,” she said, because even if she hadn’t seen it yet, she wasn’t taking any chances.

She took the gun off of him and ran, panting—and for just one second, she could swear she saw something moving around in the branches.

Hopper’s flashlight shone on the small speckles of blood that they still followed. His breathing was uneasy. A part of him wanted nothing more than to turn back, but he knew he had to follow the search through; it was only right.

“You two go back,” he called over his shoulder.

Callahan and Powell stopped talking. “Uh... what?”

“I said go back. Now.”

“But chief—”

“Now, god damn it!”

They hesitated, and then hurried down the hillside. Once they were out of earshot, Hopper took out a pack of Camel’s and lit up. He stood there for a moment, bitterly contemplating how it would all end end, and walked another twenty feet.

The beam of his torch shone upon the sign wired into the chain-link fence, smeared with red. HAWKINS NATIONAL LABORATORY.

“You’re going to feel a little bit of pressure on your forehead, Will,” said Dr. Owens, voice muffled with static.

Roman looked away from the screen, even though watching this was vital; even though it could hold so many answers. “He’s not the one.”

“We know that,” said her companion. “But he’s *one of them*, now.”

2. Chapter Two

Notes for the Chapter:

Highly recommend going back to read chapter 1. Edits were made.

He was asleep beside her, breathing evenly and smiling just a little from the good dreams which plagued him. *Thank God*. Her knee bounced up and down frantically as they waited. She worried her hands, pressing her palms into her eyes. It was everything she could do, at this point, not to scream. Out of rage, and fear, and confusion. Out of disappointment. Not at Will, of course; at herself.

She had done everything—*everything*—to make sure that they wouldn't be hurt again. She had suffered sleepless nights and worked until her back felt like it was breaking. She had held her youngest as he cried himself to sleep from the countless dreams he suffered, her heart aching all the while. She'd taken care of Jonathan in the small ways; making sure he had meals after a long shift, covering him up when he fell asleep doing homework, given him space, and been there, too...

Nothing worked. Everything she did backfired. God, she was a terrible mother. In that moment, Joyce Byers hated herself. She hated that she had failed her children, and that Will hadn't... Hadn't trusted her enough to tell her what was going on.

Tap, tap, tap.

The secretary behind the glass partition was madly typing away, blissfully oblivious to Joyce's struggles. That pissed the older woman off. She rose from the uncomfortable chair she'd been directed to an hour earlier, hastily wiping her tears, and marched up to the desk.

"Excuse me?"

Nothing. Betty Travers, as her name plaque read, kept working. Her red painted lips were whirled into a strange smile.

“Excuse me,” Joyce said again. “My son and I have been waiting—”

Betty looked up. “The specialists are occupied right now, Ms. Byers, but if you just stay seated a little longer, I assure you, you’ll be out of here soon.”

“Listen, *Betty*,” Joyce leaned forward, “I am not in the mood for your hierarchy shit. There is something wrong with my son. A man in there said that if I needed to, I could bring him here, to be *treated*—now page Dr. Owens right now, or I swear to god, I’ll break this glass with my bare hands and *strangle you to death*.”

She was livid, and aching for a cigarette. Betty pursed her lips and took her sweet time punching the number into the phone. Joyce slammed her fist against the glass. The secretary jumped, glared, and hit ‘call’.

Joyce leaned against the wall as the bitch talked quietly into the phone. She picked up a few words, like ‘madwoman,’ ‘lunatic,’ and ‘please hurry.’ A moment later, the balding man she knew as Dr. Owens strode through the door.

She had only met him once—three months after the incident (as she and Hopper had dubbed it). He’d shown up on her front porch and told her, without asking to come inside, that if something was *wrong* with Will, if something was *the matter* with her son, if something *happened* to him, she was to come to the department and request to see him. That he would take care of it.

Well, something had been *wrong* for a while, and Joyce had known it, try as she had to pray it would get better, to help Will on her own. Nothing was working and it was only getting worse. This was her last resort. He needed help, and she couldn’t provide it—as hard as that was to accept.

“Ms. Byers,” the doctor smiled thinly. He looked weary. Human in a way his predecessor had not. “You asked to see me?”

Joyce frowned. “You’re damn right.”

Leaves crunched under their boots, filling the air with a dank aroma. Powell kept ahead of his partner, hand on his firearm.

He had grown sick and tired of this job, of being looked down on, many years before. But that came with the title of deputy. No one, except maybe children, would take you seriously. You were a joke. A backup in case the real man got taken down.

Hopper was a real man. A good man. And Greg Powell loved him like a brother. But eight years ago, Chief Conley had retired, and Powell had been up for his position. Then Jim Hopper came waltzing in with his dead baby girl and the need for a distraction. Conley had always harboured a soft spot for him, and so Powell had stayed deputy and Hopper, with the experience of a city detective, moved up to Chief.

Powell got it. Even respected it. But he did not like it. And being stuck with a numbskull like Callahan four to five days a week was more than he could bear.

“Maybe we should split up,” his partner suggested.

“We should not.”

“We’re not even supposed to be looking. Chief said to go back.”

Powell rolled his eyes. “What the chief don’t know won’t hurt the man,” he said. “Now keep your eyes open, and your mouth shut, you hear?”

“Copy,” said Callahan. If there was one good thing about him, it was his obedience.

Powell kept on. The air hung heavy with a sort of thick, cold mist. It made him feel unclean. There was something so unnatural about it all; something that gave him the heebie-jeebies.

He skirted around trees, the beam of his flashlight picking up nothing but park and thickets and a chain link fence to the east. They stayed clear of that. Powell was wary about it; he knew where it led. He’d heard the stories. There was no reason to get mixed up in all of that, he told himself. No reason to go poking your nose where it just did not belong.

Just look, he thought, determinedly. Find the body.

“Powell,” said Callahan.

“Now what did I tell you about keeping your damn mouth shut, boy?”

The lecture died on his lips. Callahan was white faced and wide eyed and trembling where he stood. His breaths were shallow, given the thin clouds of air his thin lips emitted. Powell followed his light, heart in his throat.

There, tangled up in the shrubbery, all bloody and torn up, was a jacket. And not just any old jacket; he knew exactly who it belonged to (they both did): Carol Weathers. That girl had gotten herself in more trouble than even her dumbass boyfriend did.

“Well, shit,” said Powell. *Look at that. Done got yourself mixed up in it anyway.*

“So what you’re saying is, he flipped out.”

Max slammed her fist into the side of the *Space Invaders* machine; that was her second loss in a row after a five-time winning streak. “Jesus, Mike, yes,” she turned to look at him, hands folded over her chest. “He coughed up a freaking *tadpole*. There’s something wrong with him. And I get the feeling you know that. You’ve all known that.”

She eyed them all accusingly, chin up, not backing down for a second—just as her mom had taught her.

Dustin looked down at the customary star-patterned floor of the arcade. They were in the back area, with the oldest games that no one played anymore. They wouldn’t be overheard. “Listen,” said Lucas, looking between them all, “this is heavy shit, and I don’t think it’s safe to talk about it here.”

“She needs to know,” said Dustin. “I mean, what if she ends up getting herself killed because—”

"I'm right here, asshole," Max snapped.

Mike stepped in-between them. "The point is, it's not safe to keep you in the dark."

"Yeah, obviously. But I want to know, before I potentially sign my death wish... Does this have anything to do with last year? With all of that weird shit everyone talks about? And Will 'coming back to life,' or whatever?"

She'd read the papers, heard the stories, ignored the whispers. Ignorance was bliss, she'd told herself, maybe a thousand times or more. Only lately that hadn't been working, because pretty soon she'd started getting weird looks too, and had freaky cryptic notes in her locker. She'd been working up the courage to confront them about it.

Lucas hung his head. He stuffed his hands deep in his khaki trousers. "It has *everything* to do with it."

Max pursed her lips. *They're my friends. The only friends I've got. Why not just listen to them?* "Let's bounce, posers," she said, and grabbed her army jacket off of the pool table nearby.

Nancy's hands were shaking. Her scared one—the one she'd sliced open with a knife nearly a year ago—was burning. She knew what it meant; deep down inside she knew. But she also knew that she wasn't ready. She didn't want it to begin again, though she knew that no matter what, it would.

A knock on her window startled her. She whipped around, expecting to see Steve, but Jonathan was with him as well. Nancy slipped off of her bed, feeling sick to her stomach, and pulled the window up. "What an unexpected addition," she said, pathetically attempting to act normal. To keep up her facade of strong and level-headed.

Jonathan smiled just a little. Nancy stepped aside to let them both in. Steve brushed off his jacket. "What's with the urgency, Nance?"

"I... stuff is going down, okay? And I know it's like, the last thing anyone wants, but it's happening."

Jonathan shifted. "Like what?"

"Like the other night, I came home, and Mike was up, right? And then the TV starts going ape-shit, and I *heard* her."

Steve paled. Jon took a step forward. "You heard El?"

She nodded, and Steve's eyebrows rose. "Mike did, too. I swear to God, Jon, she was *here*." Nancy hadn't been so sure of anything since last year, when she had expressed her desire to kill the monster. There had been a sort of certain conviction then, like there was now. Only stronger; magnified by grief and pain and fear.

Steve sat down on the bed and rubbed his eyes. "What else?"

Nancy mustered her courage from the depths of her heart. She told them, and as she did she paced the length of her room. Somehow she came away from it with a lit cigarette and two very anxious boys.

"Jesus Christ," Steve hissed. "He did that? He really did that?"

"No, she made it up," snapped Jon. He looked livid. They both did.

Nancy sucked in a long drag, and then exhaled out her window. It was beginning to drizzle. "That's not the point," she said. "The point is, I saw something. Just like last year."

Jonathan frowned. "And you're sure it wasn't him?"

Nancy shook her head. "No," she said, settling down across from Steve. "This thing moved too fast. It was... dark. Seeing it just felt... *weird*. Bad. I don't know..."

Steve leaned forward and took her hand. "We're gonna figure this out," he said. "I swear to God, we will."

"Yeah," Nancy tried for a smile. "But don't go after Billy, okay? I get the feeling..."

Her words died. Jonathan leaned forward with intrigue. She could see the fear in his eyes, and the doubt, and the worry. "Nancy," he pressed, and just like that she caved.

"There's something wrong with him," she blurted. "Do you remember when he first came to town? He was... different. Nice."

"Douchebags are like that," said Steve. "I would know."

Jon snorted. "Yeah, you would."

This wasn't the time for them to rekindle their animosity. Paranoid, Nancy held out her hands. They both took one, somehow knowing that was why she had offered them; not for placation but for comfort. It chilled her to the bone, but somehow also started a fire within her heart. "Please," she whispered. "I need you. I need *both* of you."

They exchanged glances; wary ones, filled with heaviness and a sort of connection that she would never understand. Steve nodded, and then Jon did.

Nancy closed her eyes with relief. "Thank you," she said.

A silence filled the room; full of words never said, and conversations that would never be had. Even the screaming of arguments that would never be uttered. Haunting, but also beautiful. "Now what?"

Steve had broken it, as Steve always would. He could not stand silence.

Nancy levelled her gaze with both of them, holding on to her sanity with a desperate grip. "We need to go look for it," she said.

Will stared at the bright, almost burning lights above him. Everything was white, here. The air carried a dewy chill that seemed to stick to the skin, reminded him of his time in the Upside Down.

His mother was beside him, holding his hand. He knew that she was afraid. He knew that everyone was, really; of him, of what he might become, or do. But Will was the most afraid. If he lost himself, what was he? What happened when the monsters which lurked in the

shadows of his mind suddenly took hold, draining the Will out of him like leeches? What happened when he no longer saw colours in the world, but darkness and death and decay? What happened when nightmares became reality?

“Would you sit up for me, please, Will?”

The voice belonged to Dr. Owens, an ageing man who looked more like a ghoul to Will. Even so, he did as asked. A moment later, something was being settled over his head.

“What is that?” his mom asked, voice shaking just slightly.

Dr. Owens carefully went about placing the little dots to Will’s skull, digging into his hair. “This is called an electroencephalogram—though, that is rather a mouthful. EEG will do just fine for most.”

Will swallowed. “What does it do?”

“It monitors your brain waves,” Dr. Owens said. “I’m going to hook you up to a machine, Will, and I’m going to ask you some questions. I hope that’s alright.”

Will looked to his mother, who appeared uncertain, herself. He sucked in a sharp breath. “Yeah, okay.” *I’ll probably die, anyway.*

Dr. Owens nodded. “It would be best if you left, Ms. Byers.”

“Like hell,” Joyce said. She gripped Will’s hand tighter. “Whatever you do, you do in front of me, or you don’t do it at all. And I know how exciting this all must be for you, but for me, I’m just trying to protect my boy. So I’m staying.”

Dr. Owens cocked his head like he was observing some sort of foreign animal. The way a scientist looks at that which he deems beneath his notice or care. “Very well,” he said. “Though, I should warn you, things may get... uncomfortable.”

“Which is exactly why I’m staying,” his mom said.

Will looked between the two of them and felt the air turn almost electric. He bit his lip. “Can we just... do this please? Please.”

Dr. Owens nodded. "Lay down, please, Will. Close your eyes."

Will did as he was asked, wanting nothing more at that point than to lay down in his bed at home, listening to *The Clash* or *Joy Division*. He felt calmed by the thought.

"Oh, no, don't do that. I ask you not to revert to your... happy place, please. Now, just focus on the sound of my voice. Imagine nothing else. The world is dark. You're safe... the world is dark..."

The world was dark.

His eyes shot open, but there was nothing to see. Will was on his back, gasping for air. The ground was cold. Everything was cold. His lungs felt pressured, like they were full of helium and might burst at any given moment.

He rolled onto all fours, coughing. Water splashed. It was shallow; only reaching his wrists. But it was freezing.

Will struggled to his feet. There was nothing but he, himself. Fear gripped him and stabbed his heart, leaving a gaping hole for the emptiness to fill. It manifested its home there, and weakened him. He was going to die here, he realised. Maybe not today, or tomorrow, or even for years. But when he died, this would be the place where it happened. He was sure.

"Will?"

The man's voice—what was his name?—did not echo. It was soft, like a whisper, and firm. And solid, as though any second it could take up tangibility and become a real person.

"Will, I need you to go deeper. You're on the edges of where you need to be. Think deeper. Think fear. Think pain. Think loss. Heartbreak. Loneliness. Death—"

Will screamed. The world—if this place could be considered a world—shattered into a thousand pieces and came for him. Shards of broken glass dug into his skin. He was bleeding, he was dying..

He was the monster. The sky was orange and crackling with fire.

And there was little Will Byers, wide-eyed and just about ready to piss himself from fear, staring up at this thing. This many-legged, gigantic thing.

Thunder boomed. Wind howled. It was the Storm. And it was coming.

Will gasped. The lights above him were now flickering madly. His fingers curled around the leather bench beneath him. His mom cried out. "It's okay, baby," she said. "It's okay. We'll go home now, okay? I promise. I promise..."

The basement was dimly lit and comforting, but not comforting enough. Not for any of them.

Mike leaned up against the stairwell post, eyes fixed on the fort in the corner of the space. It was still up. Still waiting for her. And so was he; he always would be. She was here and he could feel it. Just on the edges of his reach, of his sight.

"So... there are monsters?"

His gaze flitted to Max. She was on the couch, head in her hands. "Yeah," he said.

"And alternate realities?"

"Yes," said Lucas.

"And telekinesis is like, a thing?!"

"Yup," said Dustin.

Max shot to her feet, red hair flying. "You guys do realise how awesome this is, right?! I mean, Jesus Christ, yes, it's insane, but what if these things, these *monsters*, are actually aliens, and that girl —"

"She's not an *alien*, Max," Mike said sharply. Max rounded on him, face flushed. She was obsessed with this stuff; she even had her own trapper keeper full of conspiracy theories, UFO sightings, and articles reporting supposed alien activity. Mike shrugged. "She's just

different.”

Max sighed. “Okay, maybe not. Maybe she really is just some crazy girl the FBI or the CIA is after. In which case, I’m going home.” She lunged for her backpack and was halfway up the stairs when Mike grabbed her hand.

“You can go,” he said. “No one’s stopping you. But *don’t tell anyone*. Please.”

Maybe it was his tone. Maybe it was her fear. Either way, she nodded. He relinquished his grip on her wrist, which she rubbed gingerly. “I won’t tell,” she said. “And... I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“But you don’t—”

“Any hell is better than the one I’m living in right now, Mike Wheeler,” she said. And then she was gone.

Lucas leaned against the wall. “What does she mean by that, do you think?”

“Oh my god, you’re so blind.” Dustin shook his head.

Mike rubbed the bridge of his nose. The last thing he needed was another bickering match between the two of them, competing for who knew Max better, who Max liked more, who could get her to fess up about her weird family... “Please, you guys, just... Not tonight, alright?”

“What is *that* supposed to mean?” demanded Lucas.

“It means you guys have been total assholes to each other since you realised you both like Max! And we really don’t have time for that, because I have something serious to tell you both that I haven’t gotten the chance to talk about and it’s driving me nuts!”

Someone cleared their throat behind him. Mike’s blood ran cold. He turned, only to discover that Max was right there. “I forgot my jacket,” she said, slowly.

“Shit,” said Dustin. He began to search for it. Lucas found it on the

floor. He bumped Mike's shoulder as he passed to hand it to Max.

"I know I'm new to this thing," began Max, "but... I want to help. Will is my friend, too. And if there's one thing I know, it's that we can't all be at each other's throats when we're trying to help him."

"What are you getting at?" Mike asked.

"I'm saying, cut the crap. All of you. You're my friends, and you're kind of all I've got, and to be honest, what I've got is pretty good. So... if something happens, I'm gonna be there. And you guys will be there for each other, right?"

The three of them exchanged glances. Mike felt a tension melt away he hadn't even been aware of. Suddenly, he was struck by how much they meant to him. "Right," he said, voice firm.

"Yeah," said Dustin. Lucas nodded.

"Awesome," said Max. "Now dish, Mike."

Mike glanced once more at the fort, trying to sort his thoughts, and then swallowed. "This thing happened last night, and... it was totally insane, but it happened."

"How insane?" asked Lucas, voice skeptical.

"El is alive."

The gun in her hand stuck to her skin. Every once in a while, she adjusted her grip. Ahead there was only forest, but the thought of taking another step, which was reiterated every time she did so, made her skin crawl.

"Where did you see it?" Steve asked, bat thrown over his shoulder.

"Father west, I think," said Nancy.

They adjusted their path accordingly. Nancy led, with Steve on her right and Jon on her left. It felt so easy; so natural. It was terrifying.

“Keep that light outta my eyes,” snapped a voice—one unexpected but recognised to Nancy’s ears. She turned to Jon, wide eyed.

“*Duck,*” she hissed.

The three of them crouched down, hidden behind thick brushes. Nancy listened closely.

“Do you think the chief’s found anything?”

“Don’t reckon so,” said Powell, “but might be. Seems she was bloodied up pretty bad, though.”

Nancy bit back a gasp. She locked eyes with Steve, and reached for his arm. Slowly and carefully, she peeked her head around the corner and saw them. The light was terrible and the fog in the air hung like a veil, but very clearly she made out the two deputies on Chief Hopper’s force. And in Callahan’s arms was a bloody red jacket.

Nancy’s grip around Steve’s arm tightened. She pulled back into her hiding place, chest tight.

They waited until the footfalls of the men were long gone before speaking. Nancy fell onto all fours, gasping for breath, clutching at her throat. “Oh my god, oh my god...”

“What?” Steve leaned close, pushing her hair from her eyes. “Nancy, what the hell did you see?”

“Her jacket,” Nancy sobbed. Tears blurred her vision. “*Carol.*”

“Holy *shit.*”

“It’s back, Steve,” Nancy sobbed, the real reason for her tears. “Or maybe something else came through. I don’t know. But something is out there and we have to stop it.”

She felt Jon’s hand on her back; something reassuring. She pulled Steve into her arms, and the three of them lay huddled in a heap, hidden by the dripping shrubbery. Through all of the pain there was a certain sense of rightness to this. A certain sense of belonging.

“We have to keep moving,” Jon said, after a moment.

“Jon—”

“He’s right,” said Steve. “We keep going. No matter what.”

Joyce pulled into the drive, gravel cracking under the wheels. The porch light was on. Gnats buzzed around it, one or two occasionally falling.

Will, beside her, stirred. “We’re home?”

“Yeah,” she said, voice breaking. “It’s okay, now.”

He had screamed. She remembered it and always would, from now until the day she died. It had been pierced, almost... almost *inhumane*. And he’d been thrashing around on that table, eyes rolled into the back of his head... and he had hovered (*nearly a foot, and she’d tried to push him back down, but it hadn’t worked; there had been some force working against her*).

Will wiped his face, which she realised only then was wet with tears. “Oh, baby,” she whispered. “I’m so, so sorry.”

She pulled him into her arms and hugged him tightly. Will curled up against her, shaking, but not crying. “Something is coming,” he told her. “Something hungry for blood.”

The breath left her lungs, but she only held him closer, wanting to take away his fear, and his pain. She would gladly take it all, even if it meant bearing it herself, just to see him smile again. Smile wholly and happily.

The sound of screeching tires and bright headlights bright her out of her clouded thoughts. Will tore away, looking suddenly grim. “It’s Hopper,” he said.

Joyce nodded, catching the *Hawkins Police* script in her side mirror. Hop slipped out of his truck. The car swayed a little. His mouth had formed a thin line, and her mind sprang immediately to Jonathan.

“Get in the house, Will.”

“But, Mom—”

“Will, get in the house.”

He frowned, scooping up his backpack, and ducked out. With a deep breath, Joyce did the same.

Hopper met her halfway up the drive. He was in uniform, and covered with a thin layer of mist. Joyce glanced back at the house, watching Will go inside, and then turned back to him. “What happened?”

“Something is here,” Hopper said. Hearing his voice was... eerie. She hadn’t spoken to him in a few weeks, but with the sound of him, her fear ebbed (despite his words). “I don’t know what, and I don’t know how, but it is. I’m sure of it.”

Joyce swallowed. “Did you see it?”

“No,” he wiped a hand over his face, “it took someone. There was blood all through the woods, and it led right up to the department, Joyce. Jesus Christ, I don’t think I’ve ever...”

“Hey,” Joyce laid a hand on his arm. “We’ll figure it out, okay? I promise.”

“I have to talk to you,” he told her, “I need your help.”

“But Will is inside—”

“We’ll take him, and we’ll drop him off at the Wheelers,” Hopper started back to his car. His fingers hovered over the handle. “I need you to be with me on this. Are you with me, Joyce?”

She found herself nodding, and with this promise came an overwhelming sense of drowning; drowning in clear waters, gasping for breath. Suffocation. “I’m with you,” she said, and went for Will.

Karen descended the stairwell, a bowl of popcorn in hand, trying her

best to be quiet. She heard them talking in heated whispers, but couldn't make out the words. When she caught sight of them, all sat around the table, which was remarkably clear, an alarm went off in her mind.

She set the bowl down. "I brought snacks."

Her son jumped and rounded on her. "Mom! Hey! We were just..."

"Planning out our next campaign," Dustin finished smoothly.

She knew they were lying, and they knew that she knew. *I can't let it be like last time. I can't let him get hurt again.* "Mike," she said, "can I speak to you for a moment? In private?"

Mike glanced at his friends, before reluctantly following her into the bathroom. She turned on the light and sat him down on the covered toilet seat. "I want you to be honest with me," she said. "Is there anything I should know? I won't be mad, I *promise*."

Mike rolled his eyes. "That's what parents always say. And then kids tell the truth, and the parents get mad."

Karen sighed. She leaned against the counter and folded her arms over her chest. "Yeah, okay. Fair point. But," she made him look at her, "I'm not most moms. I really mean it, Mike. You may be my son, but you're a *person*, too."

Mike ducked his head again. "I can't," he whispered.

A frown briefly crossed her features before she gathered her patience again. "Why not, baby?"

"It's not safe," he said, and when he met her eyes he saw a passion there, which was so intense it almost frightened her. "And you wouldn't understand. But I need you to trust me, okay? *Please*. If you trust me this time, I swear I'll trust you."

"Michael..." she kneeled in front of him, and took his hands in her own. "Whatever you do, as long as you believe in it, I'm going to support you. But you need to look out for yourself. I can't always be there—one day, I won't be, at all."

He looked away, at the wall. "I know," he whispered.

"Do you?"

Their eyes locked once more. Karen suppressed a shiver. "I do," he said firmly. "And I promise I'll do my best not to get into trouble."

She nodded, leaned up, and kissed his forehead. She could only believe him. He had ways of finding his own path, her son. Ways of figuring out how to get around authority, how to worm away from diplomacy. He didn't know that, of course. But it was there. This natural affinity with independence.

"No going out tonight," she said.

Mike huffed. "Yeah. Okay."

"Michael."

"Okay."

Her fingers touched the stone hesitantly, barely gracing the wet rock. "Do you think anything's down there?"

There was a cave—or what appeared to be one. They had found it not far into the woods. Nancy didn't like the look of it; she didn't like how they had almost missed it, and how small the entrance was. She didn't like how far her voice echoed when she yelled into it.

"Maybe," Jon said, "but I'm not taking any risks with either of you. We should tell Hopper—"

"And what will he do?" Steve glared down at Jon, hands curled into fists. "The guy couldn't fit through there in his heyday."

Nancy found herself snorting. "I could," she said.

"No," they snapped, together. Jon grabbed her shoulder. "Nancy, no. You go down there, who knows what you'll find."

"Maybe I'll find the monster," she said. "I could—"

“You’re not thinking rationally,” said Steve. “Jesus, what’s wrong with you?”

Nancy shook her head, her mind a dizzying cloud of confusion. “I don’t... I don’t know.” He was right, she realised.

Suddenly, a high pitched screeching filled her ears—like a bad frequency on full blast. Nancy gasped. Her ears popped. She crawled away from the cave entrance, twigs digging into her palms, eyes wide and streaming.

“What?! Nancy, what’s wrong?”

Steve knelt beside her. He shook her shoulders, made her meet his eyes. She spotted Jon leaned over the hole, light pouring into the entrance and mingling with the shadow. “Jon, get away from there!”

Jon whirled around. “There’s nothing—”

“I heard it,” she whispered, glancing desperately to Steve, pleading with him to believe her. “I swear to God, I heard it.”

Steve’s brow furrowed. “Heard what?”

But she didn’t need to say it, because it was right behind him. Taller than the trees, with glowing red eyes and skin like laced ink. Just... there.

Her heart stopped. “Steve,” she whispered, “*Run.*”

Jon followed her gaze. He jerked back, but the thing—whatever the hell it was—wasn’t looking at him.

Nancy dug her nails into Steve’s chest. “On the count of three. One, two, three—”

He pulled her up, grabbed Jonathan by the arm, and they ran. They ran like they had no life to lose and everything to gain if they could just reach the road.

“*Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god...*”

Nancy tore through the trees. Branches whipped across her body, tearing into her skin—some struck her face and neck, others her arms. She tried to bush them away. They felt like bony fingers, grabbing at her.

And then something did.

She was jerked back, and yanked so hard she felt her arm twist back. Nancy screamed. She heard the others stop ahead, and then run toward her.

The sky was so black that she could only see its eyes, but she felt its weight on top of her. Its lungs creaked and groaned, and its skin was scaly, coated in slime, dripping on her own. It reached for her chest. *It's going to tear my heart out. It's going to tear my heart out. Oh my god.*

“JONATHAN!”

“Nancy!” that was Steve. “Nancy! Where the hell—”

It's fingers cut into her skin. She tried to move. Fire raced up her arm, and black spots danced across her vision. She shrieked, feeling warmth pool on her chest.

Something lit its face, and she saw the gills through which it breathed. Nancy sobbed. *A flashlight, it's a flashlight...*

“HELP!”

The sounds of footfalls graced her ears. The monster on top of her drew its fingers out of her chest—oh god, they had been *inside of her*—and then was gone. Nancy felt cold. Her body twitched and shivered.

“Nancy! Nancy, holy shit...”

She couldn't focus on them. Her head lolled to the side, for her neck didn't have any strength remaining. There she saw Carol's dead, torn apart body nestled in the thickets beside her. Their hair was tangled together.

Nancy tried to scream. Instead, she passed out.

Will ran down the stairs at full speed, panting. His skin was wet, and his hair was dripping, and his clothes were soaked—he was freezing. As soon as he was down and out of sight of the adults, he stopped off his jacket and plopped down onto the couch.

The others stared. Max's eyes were wide. "Will?" her voice was softer than he'd ever heard it. "Will, what's wrong?"

He dug his fingers into his cheeks, wanting to claw out his eyes. He could only see fire. "It's not over," he told them. "It's never gonna be over."

"Yeah, we know," said Lucas.

"El is back," Mike explained. "At least, I think so. I heard her."

Will sank back into the cushions. "My mom... Hopper said something. He said that someone died, I think. I don't know who. But I... There's something wrong with me and I don't know how to stop it—"

He doubled over, coughing, retching. Something was crawling up the back of his throat. A something, a bad thing, from a bad place. Will gagged, and the slug flopped lifelessly onto the ground.

"Oh my god!" Dustin backed away. "It's another one!"

Max whacked him. She marched over to Will and took him by the shoulders. "Will! Look at me! It's gonna be fine, okay? You're gonna be fine."

Lucas and Mike, wide eyed, stared at the slug on the ground. It was big, and nestled in some sort of membrane. "Holy mother of God," Lucas breathed.

Mike met Will's eyes. "How long has that been going on?"

Will swallowed back the bile in his throat. "All year," he muttered, hating himself all the more. "It's been getting worse..."

Mike raked his hands through his hair. "A year. And you've been coughing those things up... into toilets, and sinks... the *sewage*

system?"

A silence settled over them as the weight of Mike's words took hold.

Dustin cleared his throat. "Well, I'm gonna just..." he leaned down and scooped up the slug, to their disgust. "What? I could get it to grow, and then we'll be able to see what we're dealing with."

"Oh," Max whispered. "Yeah. I'll go get you a jar."

Billy turned up the music, until it blasted so loud his ears were on the verge of bleeding. He slammed his hands against the dash, barely focused on driving, and pulled up onto the lawn. His chest was heaving, his blood was pounding against his skin. He felt *alive*.

The car door closed with a loud bang. He watched the lights come on, and ran up to the front door. It burst open. Billy was greeted with the sight of his step-mother, Audra Jones. She was clothed in a silk bathrobe, her wavy red hair falling loose around her shoulders. She was frowning.

"What the hell are you doing, Billy?! Are you trying to wake the neighbours?!"

Audra Jones was a forty year old feminist who worked as an in-home hairdresser. She was a good woman. And a strong one, too. Unfortunately, she was only in his way.

Billy took a step into the house, watching as she scuttled back just a bit before gathering her courage. Her back went ram-rod straight, and she glared up at him. "Billy, go to your room."

He laughed. "Are you shitting me, right now? You think I'm gonna *listen* to you?!"

"You will, or you can get the hell out of my house and live somewhere else!"

Billy locked his jaw. "Where is Max?"

Audra's face flushed. "What's it to you?!"

His fists curled, and suddenly collided with her face. She slammed into the wall. "Where is she?! I need her!"

Audra spat out blood. "Get. Out."

Billy slammed the door closed with his foot. He didn't take his eyes off of her face, which was equally as fixed on his own. She trembled, but there was a ferocity to her that made things difficult. Billy grabbed her by her hair, yanked her to her feet, and dragged her to the couch. She screamed and fought the whole time.

"Where is my sister?"

Audra clawed at the skin of his face. She drew blood. "That girl is not your sister," she hissed. "Now let me go."

Billy did. Audra scrambled away, making for the door, which she yanked open.

What she saw outside frightens her enough to slam it and face him once more. By that time Billy had already grabbed the firearm from the cabinet above the brick fireplace. "It's a shame," he whispered.

And then he shot her three times in the chest.

Steam rose from her cup, curling and then disappearing. Joyce stared into the shallow depths of her coffee.

Hopper drove, eyes on the road. "I don't know how long we should wait," he said, "but I know we have to do it."

Joyce lowered her cup and glared at him. "You are not burning down that facility," she snapped.

"It's where the portal is, Joyce—"

"I don't care, Hop! You said it yourself—there could be more in there; more girls and boys like her, locked away—"

"They're not getting out," he said flatly.

Joyce grabbed his hand, which and made him look at her. “You’re better than this,” she said. “There’s another way. There’s *always* another way.”

He turned back to the road. It was raining again. Heavily, this time. “There’s something else,” he said.

But there in the middle of the road was a darkened figure. “Hop, look out!”

The car screeched to a stop. Joyce’s coffee spilled, burning her through her clothes. She hissed in pain, and they sat there, panting as rain poured down, obscuring the figure from view.

“Joyce,” Hopper muttered, “I didn’t break.”

She stopped breathing for a moment. And then she was struggling with her seat belt, hands shaking. Hopper was out of the car at the same time as her. Rain beat down on their backs, soaking them to the bone.

There she stood in all of her glory. Shivering; hair, which was longer, sticking to the sides of her face. She squinted in the light, panting. The rain had already washed her bloody nose away.

“*El*,” Joyce breathed.

Notes for the Chapter:

So, there's chapter 2! I ended up desperately trying to finish it a couple of days ago and churning out about 5,000 words in one sitting, which killed me physically and emotionally. Hope you enjoyed!

3. Chapter Three

She was shivering the whole way back, teeth chattering as she clutched desperately to Hop's oversized leather jacket—which was no more dry than anything she herself was wearing. Joyce ran a hand through her sopping hair, which had grown longer with her time away. It was darker than she had expected.

“W-Where...?”

The first word was spoken about three quarters of the way to Hop's place; the silence was broken in her soft way, accompanied by the clicking on of the stereo. The sound of statically muffled news played out.

“My house,” Hopper said, keeping his eyes on the watery road.

Joyce wrapped her arm around Eleven (*El, it was El*), hoping to offer some form of comfort. “It'll be okay,” she said. “We're gonna keep you safe. I promise.”

El bit her lip. “Promise,” she whispered, and then passed out. Joyce stared in surprise, and then checked her pulse.

Jesus Christ she's actually alive. “Hop... What do we do?”

He shrugged, glancing down at El. “We do what we can,” he said. “We get her cleaned up. We keep her safe, like you said.”

“But what about—”

“Don't,” he turned off the main road. Dirt was crushed under the tires, still partially dry for the canopy of trees above. “We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, okay? There's no need to panic.”

“I'm not panicking.”

“You will,” he countered.

Hopper pulled onto his lawn and removed his keys. The lights went out, but the radio stayed on. They both stared at it. Joyce shook

herself. “Come on, help me get her inside.”

He came around and proceeded to carry her, thin and dangling and pale, into the house. Inside, it was dark. Joyce flicked on a lamp, expecting to see clothes, beer cans, cigarette butts and dirty dishes. Instead, the place was fairly neat. “You cleaned up?”

“I had time on Tuesday,” he shrugged, laying El down on the couch. “I’ll go get her some dry clothes.”

Hop slipped out, setting his hat on the back of a nearby chair. Joyce knelt beside El, shaking her awake with as much gentleness as she could muster, though she was out of her mind—totally, and completely out of her mind with worry and concern and fear.

“Tired,” El whispered.

“I know, sweetie,” Joyce tried for a smile, “I know, but you need to get warm. I’m gonna give you a bath, okay?”

Her eyes snapped open and she flinched away. “Bath?”

“Not that kind of bath,” said Joyce, hurriedly. “No, just to get you clean, okay? Is that okay?”

With calculation written all over her face, El nodded. Joyce’s shoulders sank with relief. She took the girl’s hand and really did smile, then. Hopper returned with an oversized black shirt and socks. He warily laid them on the coffee table. They wouldn’t be perfect, but they would do.

“Come on,” Joyce grabbed the clothes and led El to the bathroom.

“Wake up! Wake up, Nancy!”

She gasped, eyes full of tears, and focused on him slowly. Jonathan held her hand tight in his own as his heart slammed against his ribcage. “W-What...?”

"You were screaming," Steve said, kneeling beside her. His gaze flirted briefly to their intertwined fingers. His cheeks flushed, but he said nothing. Jonathan resisted the urge to let go. "Nancy, we saw something—"

"Carol," muttered Nancy. "Steve, Carol..."

Steve and Jon exchanged glances. *She's delirious*, they both realised. "Nancy," Jonathan couldn't help but focus on the gash in her forehead—or the blood drying on her chest. "Can you sit up?"

"It's Carol." she gestured to Jon's left, behind Steve. They both turned. In the darkness, it was hard to see anything but a slight mass of leaves and twigs. Jon shined his light on it, hands shaking, and backed away in utter fright.

She's all bloody, she's not even together anymore, it's just pieces...

"Oh, fuck," said Steve. His shoulder pressed into Jonathan's, having jerked away from the body (that's all it was; just a body, just something that existed) himself. He groped for Jon's hand, chest heaving. His fingers were cold. "Fucking shit..."

There were tears on his cheeks. Nancy sobbed, closing her eyes and looking away. Jon shook himself of the sight, sick, and went back to her; trying to dry away the blood with his shirt. "I'll be okay," he whispered, "I promise, it'll be okay."

"No," she shook her head, "it was gonna do that to me. Jon, it was gonna rip me apart—"

"Don't think like that," said Steve. He seemed to have gathered himself, if a little, though he wouldn't take his eyes off of Carol's body. "We'll get you home."

He scooped her up (she winced), and they made their way out of the woods and toward the shadowed road. As they walked, leaves crunched beneath their feet. Jonathan lit the way with unsteady hands.

The asphalt was dampened. It rained lightly, pattering on Nancy's corduroy jacket, chilling them to their cores. Their hair stuck to their

skin, and their eyes were narrowed against the elements. Nancy was asleep. "Do you have a quarter?"

Steve startled. "What?"

Jonathan gestured to the payphone about ten feet away. "To phone the police. Someone has to call it in..."

Steve nodded. "Let me just—" they hurried back to his car. Steve laid Nancy in the back, utterly gentle. He stripped off his jacket and placed it under her head carefully. His wallet was in the glovebox. "I can call..."

"No," Jon took the change, "let me do it."

"Flo? You here?"

Callahan set his hat on the peg beside the door. He was drenched to his damn bone, and shivering to show it. Beside him, Powell slipped off his rain jacket and ran a hand down his face. He set the bagged coat on the desk table. They both looked at it.

To their right, a banging sounded. Callahan jumped. "Shit!" exclaimed Flo. "Jesus Christ almighty, lord in heaven—"

"Florence?" Powell, looking a little amused, rounded the corner to the kitchen. Callahan followed.

"I spilt the damn cookies," Flo muttered. "Look at this mess—where's the intern?"

"We don't have an intern," said Callahan, smirking.

"Screw that. You, with your young knees—clean this up for me, will you?"

Callahan rolled his eyes, knelt, and began to gather the greasy chocolate chip cookies. The phone rang, and Flo hurried off to answer it. Powell went to the fridge and pulled out a carton of milk.

“Any of those still look edible?”

“No—”

“Boys! Get in here!”

Callahan sprang up. They ran to the office. Flo was standing over her desk, face ashen and eyes wide—her gaze was fixed on the bagged coat. “It’s Carol Weathers,” she said, slowly. “Some kids found her body out by Cornwallis.”

Callahan stopped dead. A chill rolled up his spine. In the back of his mind, there was only one thought: *It’s starting again.*

What ‘it’ was, he didn’t know.

The water ran down her back, hot and smelling of something sweet. Joyce scrubbed bubbles into El’s hair with a gentleness she had never felt. At the facility, they’d done it rough; thrown her into a shower stall and doused her with cold water, scraping her scalp with suds. She winced at the memory.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No,” El closed her eyes. “What... What is it called?”

“The soap? Shampoo.” Joyce’s voice was patient, not unlike Mike’s. She just explained, like he did.

“It smells good,” she said, with a small smile. It really did.

“Orange,” Joyce told her, smiling too. “Hopper has interesting taste.” She laughed to herself, then, but El didn’t know why. It was a nice laugh, though.

“How do they make it smell like that?”

Joyce thought. “I don’t really know,” she admitted. “It’s just scent. Lean your head back.”

El did. Joyce filled a cup with the hot, not-quite-steamy water and rinsed the bubbles from El's hair. It felt nice. Nothing had felt so wonderful in so long—after months *there*, in *that place*—it was like she could finally rest again.

“Better?”

“Better.”

Joyce helped her out and left her alone to dry off. El did so. She dressed in the makeshift pajamas and stared at her distorted reflection in the foggy mirror. She wiped the steam away, and her eyes widened.

The last time she had seen herself—truly seen herself—had been in Mike's bathroom. That had been a long time ago, she knew. How long, she had no idea, but it had been long.

Her face was clean of dirt and grime, and her eyes were bright. A little red, but bright. And her hair was brown. She had felt it many times while in the Upside Down. She had seen little glimpses in grubby glass and murky waters, but not like this. It was dark; the water, she knew, made it darker, but even so she could vaguely recall having long, wavy light brown locks as a child. Before they had been brutally shaved off.

“*Eleven? Are you listening to me?*”

Eleven (Jane, she thought firmly—but the resolve with which she had held the name was fading, as was her want to even be alive) looked up at the white-haired man she had come to know as ‘Papa.’ He was her father. He said so, and she remembered him even from when she was small, so it had to be true.

“Yes,” *Eleven* said.

“Good.” *Papa kept his eyes on her as he circled the table. Has she known what a shark was, she would have compared him to one; circling his prey, eyes sharp behind a feigned softness. His wrinkled fingers twitched.*

“You will sit still for me. Do you understand?”

She bit back her ‘no,’ and nodded. Papa leaned closer. “Do you understand, Eleven? Say it, please. I must be sure.”

“I understand,” she whispered, voice raspy from screaming.

“Good.” He stepped back, smiled, and then walked out. Within moments, two white-clad assistants entered, one carrying a metal tray. There were sharp, silver things on it. Sharp silver things they were going to use on her.

Eleven squirmed where she sat. Above her, through the speakers, Papa’s voice sounded. It was muffled, but clear enough. “Stay still, Eleven.”

She did so. The woman came forward holding something sharp, and walked behind Eleven. Suddenly there was a snipping. Eleven felt a light weight leave her head. Then there was more, and more—the woman gripped her hair, pulled, scraped Eleven’s scalp, yanked...

“Okay,” she said at last, “shave it.”

The man who had been lurking in the corner approached with a thicker instrument. Eleven shrunk down in her seat, heart pounding against her chest, face hot.

“Sit up,” he grunted.

Eleven hesitated. The woman reached out and jerked her body upward and held her there. The instrument was turned on; a low humming filled her ears. She watched the little blades moving, and felt the panic rise in her throat. She began to hyperventilate; there was not enough air in this small room, not enough, not enough...

“No,” she hissed, trembling and shifting. The man grabbed her and began to shave. Tufts of hair floated downward. Eleven screamed—

“El? Are you okay, hon?”

El bit her lip. “Yes,” she said, loudly. She pulled on the long socks and slipped out.

Mike stared at the little slug. It was clinging to the glass wall with suctioned pads, occasionally popping off to thrash around in the yellow-tinged water. "It's not getting bigger," Max observed. She had been taking notes for the last hour, writing all of her observations down in a little red notebook.

Dustin raised his head from the table, looking at them blearily. "I gotta go home, or my mom is gonna kick my ass," he said. "Call me if anything... weirder happens."

He grabbed his jacket and his backpack from off the floor and then ran upstairs. The four of them stayed silent for a long moment.

Lucas shifted on the couch. "Man, if that thing gets bigger, we're screwed."

Across from Mike, Will put his head in his hands. "I suck," he whispered.

Mike and Max exchanged glances. Max glared at Lucas, and Mike scooted his chair over. He put his hand on Will's back. "You don't suck," he said. "We'll figure it out, okay?"

"But what if we don't?" Will's eyes were red-rimmed. Probably he'd been crying for a while, and none of them had noticed. "What if I just messed everything up—what if I just made everything ten times worse than it already was?"

"Will, you couldn't have. And even if you did, we know you didn't do it on purpose—"

He would have said more—much more—but the lights flickered. Mike's ears perked up and he broke off abruptly, eyes wide. *There has to be more. There has to be...* he waited, heart pounding in his chest. *Please, just give me a sign.*

She had been there. He had felt her; in his heart, in his gut. She was always there, lurking like a shadow, just out of reach. Until that moment. Just then the weak, almost invisible connection was severed entirely.

Mike shot out of his chair and hurried over to the fort.

“Mike?” Max grabbed at his wrist. “Mike, what are you doing? What’s wrong?”

They knelt beside him. Mike located the supercom, just under a blanket, and began to fiddle with it. “She was... she was here, remember? I told you, I could feel her—”

“Yeah, so?”

Mike glanced at Lucas, whose eyebrows were furrowed with concern. “So I can’t feel her anymore,” he rasped. “I can’t...”

He flipped to channel six and messed around with the frequencies, turning the dial at an agonisingly slow pace, listening with his last breath. There was nothing. Just radio waves. “She’s *gone*.”

“Take these.”

Jon dropped the little white pulls into her cupped palm. Nancy stared down at them, head pounding, and gladly swallowed them. She sighed, and relaxed against the old plaid couch. “Your mom?” she asked.

“She left a message,” Jon sat down on the chair nearby, placing a glass of water on the coffee table. “She’s at Chief Hopper’s... I don’t know why.”

Steve grunted from the couch. He was curled up beside Nancy, eyes closed, still damp from the rain. “Maybe they’re screwing.”

“Steve,” hissed Nancy.

He opened his eyes and looked to Jonathan. “Sorry, man,” he said, sounding like he meant it.

Jonathan nodded. “Are you... okay?”

He and Nancy both waited. After a moment, Steve sat up. He pressed the palms of his hands into his eyes. “Well,” he said, blinking

blearily, “a girl I called a friend until a year ago is dead, and I saw her mangled body. But hey, I’ve seen worse, right? I’ve seen monsters, and drunk dads, and mothers who never come home. I’ve got it all covered there, now. Might as well give me a fucking gold star.”

Nancy swallowed, wiping tears from her cheeks. “Steve—”

“Don’t,” he shot to his feet. “I can’t do this. I can’t... I’m not okay, Nancy. I’m *not* okay.”

They looked at one another for a while, chests heaving. Nancy reached out, grabbed his wrist, and pulled him down. Steve simply fell with her pull. She curled up against him, wrapping her arms around his waist and burying her face in his shoulder. “I’m not, either,” she said.

“I don’t think anyone is,” said Jon. He had risen to his feet and was awkwardly averting his eyes. “I’ll go get you guys a blanket—”

“No, Jon, wait,” Nancy managed to grab onto him, as well. She pulled, eyes full of tears. Jon sat down beside her, face like stone. They didn’t touch, but he was there. He was close. Silently, they all cried.

Her body was dragged across the wet mulch, wrapped in white sheets. Billy panted. He wiped his forehead of sweat and kept doing what he was doing. He kept at it, because there was nothing else to do. He couldn’t have the kid coming home and seeing her dead mother—her dead, slut of a mother. Red-haired tramp. Jesus Christ, she’d needed to go. Needed to go a long time before.

After he decided he was deep enough in the woods, Billy grabbed the shovel from out of the sheet wrap and began to dig. He stripped off his jacket and kept at it, kept at it, kept at it. He laughed. Gone, Audra was gone, and he had free reign. How great was this?

Billy dragged her body into the maybe-a-little-shallow hole he’d dug

and covered it. He levelled the ground and scattered the spare soil, dusted off his hands, and then grabbed his shovel and flashlight.

Gone, Audra was gone.

“What do you *mean*, you’ve been working with them?!”

El looked up from the radio in her hands. It was big—bigger than a supercom, and maybe newer—and heavy. She slipped off of the bed, which felt like it had never been slept in at all. The door was open just a crack. Yellow light poured through in a thin line. She crept up to it, cradling the radio against her chest.

“*Dammit*, Hop, I don’t *care* about that—”

Something slammed. El flinched back, eyes wide, her breath quickening. “Just listen to me, Joyce,” said Hopper (she knew him, by then, as Hopper; the man that had left her food to help her survive, the man that had not given up hope on her). “I was trying to get information, and I did. Everything I’ve done over the past ten months has been for you, and your boys, and that girl in there.”

El peeked around the corner. Her breath hitched that the sight of them; closer than close, cheeks flushed with fury, brows knit with confusion. Each held a cigarette. Hopper towered over Joyce, but she was angry enough that it didn’t matter. He could have been six foot eight and she still would have looked down on him.

“Why? Why would you risk your life, do—do *things*—for those people?!”

Hopper rubbed his forehead. “I wasn’t doing much—”

“Oh, venturing into some alternate reality, that’s not much at all!” Joyce stomped her foot. “Are you kidding me, Hop?! You could have died! You have no idea what *lives* there—”

“I got a better idea than you,” Hopper grunted. He took a drag. El bit her lip, eyes blurring with tears. She didn’t like it. She wasn’t sure

why, but the sight of two people who so obviously cared about one another, fighting like they didn't, made her feel sick. Did the good mean nothing to them? Did it mean so little that they would sacrifice it?

"What did they have you do?"

He backed away and leaned against the kitchen counter. "They had me sweep certain areas. Make sure they were vacant. A few people... I worked with them. We were doing something they called 'clearing'."

Joyce sighed. She ran a hand through her hair, looking very much on the verge of crying or yelling. Her body trembled (so did El's). "So... you're telling me this whole time you've known she was alive, because you *saw* her."

"Yeah."

There was a silence. And then, "And you didn't think to *say* anything?! Jesus, Hop, those kids—my own *son*—"

"I know," Hopper hissed. "Jesus Christ, Joyce, calm *down*."

"Calm down?!"

"She's sleeping—"

"I'm not."

El stepped out of the hallway, into the light. She met their eyes defiantly. Joyce's shoulders sagged. "Oh, shit. I'm so sorry, sweetie."

"It's okay," El said. She looked down at the radio in her hands. "It doesn't work?"

Hopper stared at her for a long moment, before walking over and kneeling in front of her. "This one's a bit different from your boy's Realistic," he said around his cigarette, "more buttons, more frequencies, farther range. Better for my job."

"Mike," she said, hoping he understood, hoping that he would grasp

just how desperate she was to talk to him—just how badly it hurt that it had been so long since she'd seen him, since she'd really heard his voice. Her chest ached.

Hopper nodded. "Switch it to a difference sequence," he said softly. The speaker clicked and whirred. "Alright, keep trying. Use that noggin of yours, huh?"

El smiled just a little when he did. It felt right. Smiles always did, when they were real. El held the walkie a little tighter and focused her mind, blanking, expanding, darkening. The lights flickered, and she felt around in the Nothing for him.

"—she's gone—"

Her eyes widened. "Mike?"

Her heart was in her stomach, echoing through her whole body. She gripped the walkie so tightly her knuckles turned white. Hopper nodded encouragingly, and it almost, *almost* filled the silence.

"Hello—?!"

Mike.

She felt like screaming. The lights dimmed, and then sparked. In her hands, the walkie screeched, whirred, and zapped against her skin. She dropped it with a gasp, and it clattered to the floor. Smoke rose from the black plastic.

"No," she tried to scoop it up, but it was too hot.

"Careful," said Hopper. He stayed her.

"Please," El sobbed. "*Please*. I need... I need Mike."

Hopper grabbed the walkie through his shirt and stood. "That's enough for tonight, kiddo," he said quietly, setting the broken model on a table. "You need sleep."

"But—"

“Joyce, could you fetch her a glass of water?”

Joyce seemed to snap out of another world. Her eyes had been locked on them the whole time, watching in wonder. “Yeah,” she said. “Yeah, sure.”

“But, *Mike*—”

Panic filled her. Why if she never saw him again? Hopper put his hand on her shoulder. “You’ll see him again. Maybe I’ll take you to him tomorrow. But for now, you need to sleep. Okay?”

El blinked back her tears and defiance. “Okay,” she said. Hopper led her back to the bed, and as she curled up in it, exhaustion flooded her. Any thoughts of sneaking out faded away. Hopper placed the quilt over her, and Joyce set the water on the nightstand. El vaguely remembered a coldness on her brow before sleep took hold.

Light pooled over them; warm and bright and resembling something beautiful. Nancy shifted where she sat, and then hissed in pain. “Jon,” she whispered. “Jon, get off of my arm.”

He jolted awake and jerked back, which thankfully relieved the pressure. His eyes were wide. She could practically hear his heart beating. “I-I’m sorry,” he said. And then he was scrambling up, into the kitchen where she couldn’t see him.

Nancy tried to get up, but Steve’s head was in her lap. “No, Jon, please,” she grunted, gently removed Steve, and stumbled up. The world span, and she nearly swooned. “Jonathan,” she gasped.

He was there just in time, catching her before she fell. “Hey,” he whispered, “you need water...”

“Nance?” They both turned from their spots on the floor. Steve wiped his mouth. His hair was everywhere and his eyes were red. “What happened?”

“I got dizzy,” she said. “It was nothing.”

Slowly, she rose again, being careful to keep control. Jonathan kept his hand on her back, Just behind her. Black spots danced before her eyes, but she didn't fall or stumble. Progress, however small, was still progress.

"I'll make breakfast," said Jon. Then he was gone again, less rushed this time.

Nancy stared at Steve. He sat up and patted the spot next to him. She sat, and rested her head on his chest. It felt nice. "Are you okay?"

"I'm better," he said quietly. "I mean, I totally freaked out last night —"

"You freaked *me* out," she added.

"Yeah," he sighed. "I'm sorry about that."

Nancy met his eyes. He was tearful. She placed her hands on either side of his face and kissed him softly, feeling the familiar warmth rise in her stomach and bloom in her chest. "I'm sorry too," she said.

"For what?"

"I... I wasn't strong enough last night. Like I should have been. I was stupid, I got attacked by—by *whatever* is out there—"

"Nancy—"

"We need to warn people, Steve. We need to tell the Chief, or your mom, or someone. I know we almost managed last time, but we *can't* do this alone."

"We've been training—"

"It's beyond that, now," she said. "I don't know how I know, but I do. We can't fight it alone, because I don't... I don't think *it's* alone."

They rode their bikes down the road, Max following close behind on her board. None of them had slept much last night. Max had taken the couch, and dressed in the spare clothes she always kept at Mike's

place in case she needed to stay over (which was often; more often than either of them would have liked). Will took the floor, curling up on an old sleeping bag and biting back sobs. Lucas went home, but spent the night with his hands tucked behind his head and tears running down his cheeks.

Mike was numb. He was still numb. He'd head her, he knew that—he knew it—but what if... what if what he was hearing wasn't real? What if all of the times he had seen her, around corners, in shadows—what if all of the times he'd heard her, or felt her, or talked to her in his dreams—what if all of that *wasn't real*?

Wind whipped through his hair. He shifted on his gears as they shot downhill, and then came down hard on his breaks as they reached Dustin's house. Lucas and Will stopped beside him, and Max came up after that.

Dustin was running down his walk. "The costumes are ready," he said. "My mom ironed on the patches—Happy Halloween, dudes!"

He smiled brightly. Mike mustered all of his courage and did the same. They dropped their bikes on the curb. Max turned to Will. "Wait," she said.

They did. Max grabbed Will's face and pinched his cheeks. Colour bloomed against the greenish-white pallor. He winced, and hissed in pain. "There."

"Thanks," said Will, dryly.

Inside, Dustin's mother was behind the counter cooking bacon and eggs. She waved at them. "Morning, boys! And lady...?"

"I'm Max," said Max, shouldering her backpack.

"Ah," Loraine nodded. "Well, eat what you like."

"Uh, the costumes, mom?"

"Right!" She hurried into her laundry room, and came out with four ironed, decked out khaki jumpsuits. "I hope they're to your liking—I knew those patches would come in handy—"

“Thanks for doing it,” said Mike, taking his own.

“Yeah,” added Lucas.

“It’s alright!” Loraine handed Dustin his. “How is your mother doing, William? How are you?”

“She’s good, we’re both good.” He rubbed his cheeks nervously, as though making sure they were still a little red. “I... thanks for ironing the patches on. She’s been really busy...”

“Understandable,” Loraine smiled. “I hope you boys have fun. And— and you, Max.”

Max nodded brusquely. They rushed off as one to Dustin’s room, out of the gaze and control of an adult. Lucas shut the door and turned to them. “Jesus, what did she look at Max like that for?”

“I’m a girl, dummy,” said Max. “All of your moms think I’m a tramp until—” she broke off and shook her head.

Mike sat on the edge of the bed. “My mom didn’t,” he said.

“Your mom is cool.”

Dustin shook his head. “Will, you can change first.”

Will nodded. He ducked into the closet and flicked the light on. The door closed with a dim thud. Lucas looked at Mike, eyes imploring, and Mike sighed. He threw himself back against Dustin’s bed. “So... we heard her. Or I did. Last night.”

Dustin’s eyes widened. “Are you serious?!”

“Yeah,” Mike said. “Maybe.”

“We *think* it was her,” said Lucas. “The thing is, only Mike could hear her. She said his name, apparently.”

Dustin looked to Mike. “Did she? For real?”

Mike stared at the ceiling for a moment longer, before shooting

upright. “No, okay? No, I don’t know if it was her. Maybe I’ll never know. Maybe that was the last thing I’ll ever hear—I can’t... I don’t know if she’s alive or not, anymore. I don’t know if she’s alive, I don’t... I’ve been searching for a whole year, okay? Every damn day, I look for her, and every damn day I end up with the same answer: she’s dead, and I’m crazy—”

“Mike, calm down,” Max took a step forward, hands out placatingly. “It’s okay, you’re okay—”

“It’s *not* okay!”

“STOP YELLING!” She slammed her foot down so hard the ceiling below must have rattled. Mike winced, recoiling. “Sorry. Mike, listen to me: we don’t have time for your emo shit—”

“I am not—”

“This is no time for petty denials, Michael Wheeler,” Max grabbed his hands. “You’re so moody all of the time, I don’t know what you’re like when you’re happy.”

The weight of her words crushed him. Has she ever seen him happy? Really happy? No, he didn’t think so. Sure, there had been times when he’d... when he’d been okay. When he’d laughed or smiled or been youthful—but every bit of joy felt like a betrayal, because she’d never known it. Not really.

“Mike,” Max took a step closer, eyes swirling with intensity. “You’re my friend. And I’m here for you—we’re *all* here for you—but we can’t help you if you won’t let us.”

Mike swallowed. “How can you help me when I’m too broken to fix?”

“You think *you’re* broken?” Will was standing in the closet doorway, arms folded over his chest.

Dustin groaned audibly. “This isn’t helping! None of this is helping! We can’t waste time blaming each other or calling dibs on who’s day is the shittiest! We have to be there, for each other, for the *party*. *That’s* the most important thing.”

"He's right," said Max and Lucas.

"Listen," Will spread out his arms, "we don't need to fight, or yell, or whatever. I just... I think it's been a while since anything's been normal, but now... now the strange is... it's *a lot*, and it's freaking everyone out. But I think if we all just took it one by one—together—it would be okay."

They all looked to one another. "It's about to get deep," Dustin said. "I can feel it, and I don't like it."

"Get dressed," Mike said quietly. "We'll take it as it comes."

They sat in the car, watching dozens of brightly dressed students shuffle up to the school, mingling. Living without the burden the three of them carried.

Nancy shouldered her backpack on her good side. "Are you sure you guys wanna do this?"

"No," they said together.

"We don't have to. We can just... go home. Figure things out."

"It would look weird," Jonathan said. "I can't take any more weird. My mom only just said it was okay for Will to ride his bike to school again."

Nancy frowned. "I called my mom," she said. He'd been in the shower, and Steve had been smoking in the back yard. "She said Will was okay, if you were wondering."

"I was," Jon smiled. "Thanks."

Nancy glanced again at the building. "We're going to the Chief right after," she said firmly. "I swear to god, I'm not waiting another day."

"Nancy," Steve locked his gaze with her own. "We'll tell him. We just... Have to do something normal. I'll go crazy if I don't."

"Skipping school is normal for you, Steve," Nancy raised her eyebrow, smiling a little.

"You're sure you're well enough to go?" inquired her boyfriend. "You can stay home if you want—"

"I'm fine," Nancy gripped her bag more firmly, needing it for whatever reason. "It was my left arm. I can still write. Besides, the medicine helped."

"Okay," Jon nodded. "Let's go."

The bell rang, loudly. Dustin glanced around, a sick feeling growing within. "Uh... guys?"

"What?" Mike looked up from the ground. Dustin kept surveying, desperate to be proven wrong. "Dustin, what is it?"

"We're the only ones wearing costumes," he said, horror filling his voice. "You guys, you do realise how bad this is, right? We're gonna get the shit kicked out of us!"

"Right you are, Toothless!"

They turned. Dustin's heart pounded in his ears and he braced himself for the beating to come.

"What does it matter to *you*, Troy?"

Mike had stepped up, as he'd been doing lately. It was reckless and stupid of him, but he no longer seemed to care. That was what scared Dustin the most. He didn't care anymore; he just said what he thought, or didn't say anything at all. It was really fucked up.

"Why do I care? Well, we can't have shit-stains like you making the school look bad, now, can we?" Troy leered, lips curling and eyes twinkling with a madness not yet understood by any of them.

Mike scowled. "Go to hell," he snapped.

He was turning away, about to march up to the school, when a million things happened at once: Will cried out behind them, putting his hands on his head. The sky darkened, and thunder rolled. Troy was yanked and thrown onto his back. Above him stood Max, red in the face, panting from running to catch up (they'd deserted her on their bikes, as they usually did—but hey, it was her own fault for riding that stupid board). She kicked Troy in the balls and he cried out with pain.

“Back the hell off,” she growled.

Dustin snapped out of his awe and rushed over to Will, who was no longer writhing. His nose was bloody, though; a thick line of red goop streaming from each nostril. The veins in his face were horribly visible.

“Will, man, let's get you to the bathroom,” Dustin pulled him to his feet. Lucas supported Will's other side, and they hurried off on their own; leaving Mike and Max to deal with Troy (if there was anything left to be done).

The halls were crowded, but thinning even so. Classroom doors closed and opened. The fluorescent lights flickered above as the boys moved through, desperately fighting to reach the boys' bathrooms before anything... really bad happened.

They were empty. “Thank God,” panted Dustin. He sagged against the wall with relief. Will sank to his feet, shivering. “Oh, dude, you don't look so good.”

Lucas frowned. “What happened? What do we do?”

“Just... I just need a minute.”

Dustin and Lucas waited, exchanging nervous glances. The lights flickered again, and outside, the thunder could still be heard. The door opened with a bang, emitting Mike and, surprisingly, Max.

“You can't be in here,” Dustin said.

“Are you *serious*?!”

He swallowed. What did it matter? Will was in trouble. That was all any of them knew in that moment.

Mike knelt in front of their friend. "Will? What happened?"

"I saw her," he rasped, "I... she's not in the Upside Down anymore—"

"What?" Mike's eyes had blown open wide, and his face was pale. Dustin gaped. *Not in the Upside Down?! She's out?!*

"That's *awesome!*" he exclaimed.

"Yeah, but she could be anywhere," said Lucas. He looked urgently to Will. "Dude, did you see where she was at?!"

"Some... some room. A couch... I don't know. I think she's fine. I felt—I felt *safe*—"

"Will, *where was she?!*"

"I said I don't know!"

Mike and Will's gazes were locked. Neither were relenting. Eventually, Mike threw himself back. He rested his arms on his knees. "We have to find her," he said. "It doesn't matter if she felt safe, she doesn't know what safe *is*. She could be in danger, she could be..."

"Don't do that to yourself, man," said Dustin. No one needed it.

Mike wasn't listening. He takes his hands through his curls. "If we could just find a way to contact her..."

All of the sudden it dawned on him. "We need a signal," he said hurriedly, mind working at a rapid pace. "We need a radio—"

"But the Heathkit burned down," said Lucas. "What are you talking about, anyway?"

Dustin ignored him. His heart was pounding in his ears. Max took a step forward, which snapped him out of his own head. "Dustin?"

"She has a radio," he explained. "We know she does—she talked to

Mike—if we could just find something with a range large enough, we could keep searching until we found her—”

“RadioShack,” Will rasped. His eyes were open and bloodshot.

“What?”

“Bob. My mom’s... special friend—” Lucas snorted, and Will glared. “Shut up, man. It’s a sensitive subject. Anyway. Bob Newby. He’s the manager at RadioShack, and there’s like plenty of Heathkits for sale there—”

“But what about school?” demanded Max.

“Screw school,” said Mike. He was on his feet, and they were all watching him. It was insane, but it was necessary. It was Eleven. “Let’s go!”

The bleachers were empty. They sat beneath them as it rained lightly. Steve smoked, and Jon carefully cleaned the wound on Nancy’s head. It was getting better. It was smaller, too.

“Hey!”

The three of them turned at the sound of a new, unexpected voice. It was Tommy; he was half-drenched and obviously in a rage. Grass crunched under his Nikes as he marched up to them.

“What?” asked Steve, voice flat.

“Carol,” Tommy spat. “Did you know?”

Steve dropped his cigarette and dragged his shoe over it. He kept his face impassive, which was how Nancy knew he was hurting. She stood. “Did I know what?” asked Steve.

“Her mom called mine. She’s *dead*, Harrington.”

They all winced—even Tommy. Steve glanced at the gravel below.

"I'm really sorry, man," he said, sincerely, because even if Tommy was a total douche, he'd still lost someone. "I... Jesus, I'm just so sorry."

"I don't need your sympathy," Tommy snarled. He grabbed Steve by the front of his shirt, which was Jonathan's signal to rise. "Did you have something to do with it?"

"Did I *what*?"

"You hated her—"

"Tommy, you're not thinking clearly," Nancy stepped forward, attempting to get between the two of them.

"Oh, look, it's the slut," Tommy ignored the tightening of her jaw and fists. "Maybe I should do something about you. Get even. How's that sound, Stevie Boy?"

Jon pushed Tommy back, shoving his shoulder. "Go," he said. "No one needs this right now."

"What the fuck is it to you, Byers? What, are you on your knees for him or something?"

They all stood there for a moment, breathing heavily, eyes unblinking against the storm of his words. Wind churned in Nancy's stomach. She swallowed. "Go home, Tommy," she said, softly. "Be with your family—"

No more words. There were no more words to say, no more feelings to be had. Her face stung as her world had been shifted with just one simple action; the simple movement of Tommy Haven's arm—the coldness of his fingers as they struck her cheek.

"Don't you fucking tell me what to do," he growled.

Nancy felt it; the hot redness, the fire... she looked at him, really looked, and saw nothing but someone that desperately needed saving—someone who was about to slip right over the edge.

Steve helped him to it. He tackled Tommy to the ground, and they

landed in the wet rocks. Tommy grunted. Steve pinned him down, and steadily, with precision, began beating the living shit out of his face.

“Steve, stop!”

“Fuck you, Tommy,” Steve panted. He bashed his hand against Tommy’s jaw. “Fuck you, and your stupid drunk father. Fuck me trying to help you your whole life, huh? Fuck that, you piece of rotten shit.”

Tommy was bleeding from his nose and mouth; the redness was smeared and thick. It was splattered across Steve’s hand. “Jon, stop him!”

Jon snapped out of his daze. He lunged forward and grabbed Steve around the waist, dragging him off of Tommy. “No!” Steve struggled in Jon’s firm grip. “Let me go, god dammit—”

“Steve, stop, *please*,” Nancy crouched down beside him, taking his face in her hands as she’d done that morning. Tears blurred her vision. She wiped one of his own away with a gentleness that surprised her, given her shaking body. “It’s okay. It’ll be okay. Just *calm down*.”

He was panting. Tommy, behind them, groaned and pushed himself up. Jonathan skirted around Steve, appearing fully prepared to finish the job, should the need arise. But Tommy only wiped his face, struggled to rise fully, and stumbled off.

“What the hell,” Nancy whispered, eyes on Jon.

He looked at her, and she saw then everything he’d been hiding, all accumulating to create his broken portrait of a face; the hurt, the fear, the jealousy, the anger, the care. He spread his fingers, which trembled. “We should go.”

They stopped the car in front of the diner, formerly known as Benny’s. Powell was still bitter about the whole thing; Benny’d been a

good man. No way he would have just... kicked the bucket out of nowhere.

“Looks pretty quiet,” observed Callahan.

“Yeah,” agreed Powell. “Let’s go.”

They slipped out of the cruiser and approached the premises. Powell kept his face impassive; it was never a good idea to show emotion when stepping into shit this deep. He knew something was up. Something had been up for a while. What it was, he didn’t know. Maybe he didn’t care to. But he knew, he had known the whole time—it was *bad*.

The bell above the door dinged. Inside, a few old men were sitting around a table; playing cards and laughing, enjoying retirement, Powell supposed. *Nine more years til*, he thought.

A woman behind the counter looked up when they entered. “You’re here,” she said. “That’s good.”

“Yeah, we’re here,” Powell leaned against the counter. “Question is why, isn’t it?”

Randy, her name tag read. A pretty girl. Maybe five foot two, with permed brown hair pulled back into one of those scrunchies his niece loved. “One of my coworkers—a friend, really... her name’s Audra. You know her? Red hair, maybe thirty-five?”

Powell looked to Callahan, who shook his head. “Can’t say we do.”

Randy went on. “She didn’t show up to work today, which isn’t really cause to call the po-lice, but she ain’t never missed a shift, and she’s a good woman. I called her house, and no one answered. I’m right worried, and I thought maybe y’all could check out her place? I can’t, I got customers—” she gestured to the folk in the corner.

Powell sighed. They had a lot to do today; an investigation was underway—someone had been murdered in this small town which hadn’t seen a death like this since Benny. It was serious shit, and he didn’t want to waste his time on a woman with a headcold who was too sick to reach the phone.

"Is there anyone else who might know her situation?" Callahan inquired, pulling out his notepad. "Has she got a boyfriend? Any kids?"

"She had a husband, but he passed nine months back," Randy pursed her lips. "She's got two kids. I don't like neither of 'em so good. The girl's pretty wild. The boy, though... he's somethin' else. Somethin' darker."

Powell stared. "Mmmkay," said Callahan. "And how old are they?"

"Girl's about twelve or thirteen or somethin'. Her name's Maxine, but once I called her that and she wouldn't look up 'til I said 'Max'."

"And the boy?"

"'Bout eighteen? I don't know if he's in school or not. Boy's bad news, officer. I don't like him one bit."

They exchanged glances and nodded. "Well, we're equipped for bad, m'am," said Powell. "While we're here... You have't seen anything suspicious, by any chance?"

"Suspicious?" she cocked her head.

"Yeah," said Callahan. "Like... weird, you know?"

Adequate elaboration, man. Powell rolled his eyes. Randy thought for a moment. "Well, I don't think so. Anythin' specific?"

"There was this girl—Carol Weathers? She was found dead late last night."

Randy's eyes widened. "She was goin' with Billy! I seen 'em down at Vicki's Bar the other night, foolin' around in the shrubbery and whatnot? Jesus, ifida known she'd be dead... Christ, I'd bet my money it was him!"

Powell felt his heart ramming against his sternum. "You're sure about this?"

"Yeah! Sleezy girl, bout my height, red hair? Jessum, I shouldn't

“speak ill a the dead—”

“Yes, thank you, m’am,” Powell pushed off the counter and walked, hurriedly, to the cruiser. Callahan followed. Outside, it was dark and rumbling with the coming shitstorm. They got in the car. No words were spoken, but they both knew shit was about to get real.

The trees whipped by in a blur of dull colour; leaves of gold and brown and red, all blending together in a sheet of dead orange. Above, the sky cracked and rumbled. Mike was head of the others by a good bit. He could hear nothing but his own self; his breathing, the pumping of his blood...

She was alive. She wasn’t dead, she was alive. All of this time, that dark fear had been there, looming in the back of his mind, poisoning every good thought and hope. It was like cancer, this worrying.

But she was alive. She was somewhere, in a someplace, and he was going to find her. He was going to find her and he was going to bring her home. Nothing could stop him this time. Screw it all.

“Mike! Slow down!”

Mike glanced behind him. Dustin, Will, and Lucas were madly pedalling. Ahead of Mike was Max, easily drifting and gliding on her board, occasionally crouching down when the winds grew too strong.

“Hurry!”

He wasn’t waiting. He’d waited long enough. He’d waited forever and a damn day.

They rounded a corner and came to a stop in front of the RadioShack. It was gleaming and glorious; the latest technological wonders on proud display in the front windows, along with a neon sign that read OPEN.

Mike braked, dismounted, and locked his bike in the racks. Max pulled up beside him. She looked exhilarated. “You can do this,” she

said.

“Yeah. Maybe.”

The others pulled up. Lucas glared at Mike. “You could have waited,” he said.

“Are you serious?!”

“Listen, we all want to find her—just as much as you do. She’s just as important to us as she is to you!”

“I can’t...” Mike glared. “You called her ‘weirdo’ and ‘freak’ until the day she—she killed the monster.”

“I *apologised*—”

“Guys!” Dustin stepped between them, cheeks red. “This isn’t about who was nice and who wasn’t! This is about the fact that El needs to be found, okay? We have to help her. Now come on.”

The inside was practically empty, were it not for Bob Newby. He sat behind the counter with his feet propped up, working through a crossword. He wore thick black frames which magnified his eyes. They scanned the page lazily.

“Bob?”

Bob scrambled, giving a small gasp of surprise, and managed to stay on his chair. When he saw Will, he blinked, frowned, and checked the clock on the wall. “Will, it, uh... it’s only ten in the morning. Shouldn’t you be in school?”

Will scuffed his shoe on the carpet. “Uh, yeah, about that—”

“We need a favour,” said Mike. “We have this class project—”

“Yeah,” said Lucas, “we forgot to do it, so our teacher gave us permission to leave class—”

This is the most implausible thing. “Definitely,” said Mike, praying to God it worked. “It’s kind of an emergency situation, but since we’re

normally such good students—”

“Can we use a Heathkit?” asked Will.

Bob studied them. He knew it was all bullshit, but he smiled anyway. “Who’s your teacher, then, kiddos?”

“Uh, Mr. Clarke,” said Max.

Bob paused momentarily, nodded, and then walked into the back. They followed hesitantly, exchanging nervous glances. Mike felt numb; the air seemed to thicken, and his lungs were suddenly far too insufficient.

There was a Heathkit set up in the back; teal, as the last one had been, and unburnt. “It works, right?” asked Lucas.

“I use it on occasion,” affirmed Bob. “It’s a real good radio. What do you need it for?”

Will bit his lip as Mike sat down in front of it, adjusting the dials. “We just... can I talk to you, Bob? Alone?”

Bob stared at Will for what seemed like a long time. Mike looked between them, and then at the others. *What is he doing?*

“Yeah,” said Bob. “Come on.”

They slipped out. Dustin, Lucas, and Max sat down by Mike. “Adjust the bandwidth,” Dustin said. Mike did. He pulled the headphones over his ears and listened to the mad whirring of the radio. He pressed the ‘talk’ button.

“El? Can you hear me? It’s Mike.”

Nothing.

“Go a little broader,” Mike said to Lucas, who adjusted the little silver knobs on the farthest box.

Max leaned closer. “Anything?”

“El? It’s Mike. Please, pick up. If you’re there, please, *please* pick up.” Dimly, he heard the sound of police officers dispatching. Mike’s blood ran cold. “Broader,” he said.

Lucas nodded.

“El? Are you there?”

“Copy,” said a man’s voice. “10-4.”

“I know, Hanlon—”

“10-16 on Cherry,” came a woman’s voice, “lot of yelling. You copy, Meldin?”

“El, *please*—”

“Mike?”

Everything stopped in that moment. Even his heart. Dustin, Lucas and Max excitedly looked to one another and circled Mike eagerly. He gripped the headphones tightly and leaned forward, almost folding his body in half, eyes wide. “It’s me.” *It’s you*. “Where are you?”

“Hopper’s house,” came her voice, soft and melodic. “I did something —*ah!*”

The radio sparked. Mike jerked back, and whipped his head around to the front of the shop. He could see Will through the parted curtains which normally obscured the back room. He was on his knees, clutching his head.

“Not again,” said Dustin.

“El? El, are you still there?”

Nothing. Static.

His fist pounded on the chipped brown door. They stepped back and

waited, listening to the sounds of kicked beer cans and grunting. The lock clicked, and there was Billy Jones in a wife beater and jeans, staring blearily down at them. “Cops?”

No, these are Halloween costumes, thought Powell. *Trick or treat, asshole.*

“I’m officer Callahan, this is officer Powell. We’re here to ask you a few questions. May we come in?”

Billy stepped aside to let them pass. Powell did so warily, glancing around with interest at the trashed living room. The couch was old, plaid, and ripped across the back. The television appeared to be broken. The windows were grimy, the floor was dusted with crumbs and trash and, interestingly enough, dirt. *Leaves, mud... someone’s been taking forest strolls.*

“So,” Callahan took a pen from behind his ear, “I just need to get some general information from you—”

“Where’s your mother?” Powell inquired.

Billy set his jaw. “Dead.”

Well, that was fast. “Pardon me?”

“My mother. She’s been dead since I was six. If you’re asking after Audra—she’s my step-mother.”

Just when things were getting good. “Okay, where’s your step-mother, then?”

“I don’t know,” said Billy, amiable enough. He leaned against the wall, hands in his pockets. “She goes where she goes. It’s not my job to keep track of the woman.”

He spoke like he wasn’t some seventeen year old prick with a premature drinking problem and too many questions to answer. Powell knew if he kept it up, this one would make a mistake. “What about Maxine? Audra’s daughter?”

Billy snorted. “Max? You won’t find her around here; she’s barely

home.” His eyes glinted in a way Powell didn’t understand. What he gathered in that look was a hunger, an intense one which made him extremely uneasy. “Why are you here anyway? Did they do something?”

“Your stepmother never showed up for work,” said Callahan. He was always the approachable cop—mostly because he was such a moron. “You know anything about that?”

“Not a thing,” he grinned and pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket; Morley’s. Powell had smoked those, once upon a time. The realisation made him shiver. “Like I said, it’s not my business what she does with her time. Maybe she went back to Maine, she’s got some folks there.”

Powell cocked his head. “She seem like the type to just leave you and your stepsister?”

“Maybe,” Billy sucked in such a sharp breath, his cheeks were hollowed. “She was wild, I can tell you that.”

And there it is. “Mmhm,” said Powell, trying very hard to keep his emotions in check (because if he was right, if that mistake hadn’t just been a mistake, then this boy may have either killed his own stepmother or at least been an accomplice to the deed—or some variation thereof). “Now... we heard you’ve been spending some time with Carol Weathers, is that true?”

“What, that crazy bitch?” Billy scoffed. “We hooked up, like, once.”

“You were together at Viki’s Bar the other night.”

“We were having some fun.”

“Where’d you go after that?”

“We split up,” said Billy. “I came home.”

“And she did too?”

“Yes. Jesus, what is all of this about?”

"She's dead, this girl. Some kids your age found her body in the woods not far from Viki's. All mangled up. You happen to know anything about that, Billy Jones?"

Billy's eyes flashed with something dark. He stepped off the wall. They were inches apart. He smelt of smoke, cheap beer, and deceit. *Scums breed lies*, as Powell's grandmother would have said. "I thought these questions were general," snapped the boy. "It seems to me your mind is pretty made up on what you think happened."

"Maybe it is." Powell stepped back and placed his hat on his head once more. His eyes never left Billy. "You clean this place up. It's not fit for a little girl to be living in." *No wonder she spends so much time away.* "Keep an eye out for your mother."

"Will do," said Billy, sarcasm lacing his tone.

Oh, this one's an asshole.

Will dug his nails into his scalp, trying to formulate some normal sense in all of this chaos. The world around him was dark and quaking and *wrong*. Humidity made the air sticky. Through the glass windows, red light shined.

He pushed himself to his feet, panting, and blocked the brightness with his pale, thin hands.

"Will?"

He turned.

She was standing in the middle of the empty shop, eyes full of tears, chest rising and falling with a sick rapidity. Eleven. He knew it in his heart. "You're here," he whispered. "I can talk to you."

He'd seen her before; little glimpses in his dreams and visions, but he'd never been sure enough that it really was her, or that any of it was actually real. The thought of her here now, in this *place*, made him feel ill. They both didn't have to suffer.

"I did something," she said, stepping forward. "To come back."

His heart pounded. "You did what?"

She swallowed and looked away, eyes burning. He knew her eyes were burning, because his were, too. "El, what did you do?"

"Link," she said softly, meeting his eyes again. "You and me, here." She tapped her temple with a short, clean finger.

Will gaped. *She doesn't mean...? She can't mean...?* "Why?! Why would you do that? Why would you do that to me?!"

"To get free," she said. "I *had to*."

"So-so what? Is this why I've been having these visions? Is it why I keep—flashing between here and there?!"

She was crying, now. Flinching at every word like a brittle weed in a summer wind. "Yes."

"You put me through months of hell, gave me bad dreams—I couldn't *sleep*—"

"Will, I'm *sorry*," she wiped her eyes and came closer, hands out placatingly. Will shook his head, rage in his chest.

"Sorry?! You're *sorry*?! How long?"

"What?"

"I said, *how long*?!"

"I... months. It wouldn't... work right. I was tired."

"Every time I flashed back," he said. "That was *you*, wasn't it?"

"Yes," she sobbed. "I'm *so* sorry, Will. I didn't... I wanted—"

He lashed; a hot whip of anger striking her mid-sentence. He'd never been so angry before. "You wanted to see Mike, right? Because that's all you care about. Not anyone else. It's just you two in your own world, right?"

Eleven bit her lip and put her head in her hands. “I’m *sorry*,” she sobbed again. She kept saying it, over and over, but he couldn’t hear her for the pounding of his pulse and the storm churning outside.

Then the windows shattered. They blew in, glass busting into a thousand tiny shards. El screamed and ducked. Will lunged at her, covering her face with his body. She felt real, here. It was real, wasn’t it?

“We have to go,” Will told her. “Why are we here?”

She stared at him for a moment. Then she pointed to herself, and then to him. To herself again, and to the floor. *You to me, me to here.*

“Oh god.”

“Yeah.”

They looked at one another. Guilt rose up in his stomach, curling along the walls of it like ivy. He glanced down at his hands, which were holding her own. He hadn’t even realised... “I’m sorry I yelled at you.” *You’re hurting, too.*

And he could feel that hurt. Dimly so, granted, but it was there. Terrifying, and churning, and so dark. But there, accompanied by his own. Maybe she felt that in her mind.

“It’s okay,” she told him.

The light got brighter. Will curled up against her, needing the comfort, for he was fairly sure just then that they were both going to die. The heat was so intense, it had to be hell. But then, all at once, the world was cool again. The mass which was Eleven disappeared, replaced by a cheap carpet. Will blinked blearily, eyes adjusting to the new spectrum.

“What... what happened?”

“What *happened*?!” That was Lucas. “Man, you freaking disappeared! You were just gone! There, and then, poof!”

Dustin helped him to his feet. “What happened, Will?”

"A lot of things," he said. "I can't explain it all right now, but—is that Mr. Clarke?"

They all turned, even speechless Bob, and saw that Mr. Clarke had indeed pulled up in his bright yellow Bug. He was running toward the building.

"Mr. Clarke! What are you—?"

"I could ask you boys the same question," he said, closing the glass shop door behind him. "You missed class, so I asked around—Ms. Hayes said she spotted you all leaving, and—Jesus, *Bob*? Is that you?"

"Okay, so many things are happening right now, and my mind just can't take it." Dustin looked between the two stunned adults. "Mr. Clarke, you know Bob?"

"We were in school together," said Bob. "Best friends, class of '64."

"Wow," said Mr. Clarke.

"Listen!" Mike held out his arms. "We don't have time. Something is wrong with Will, and we need to tell the chief—he has Eleven—"

"Mike, there's something you should know," Will swallowed. "It's about Eleven."

"What?"

"Uh, guys...?"

"*What?*" They both whipped around and discovered that the attention of the others was directed out the window, through which military vehicle after military vehicle could be seen driving by.

"Holy shit," said Dustin. "They know."

"We have to go," said Mike. "Now. Mr. Clarke, can you drive us?"

"I have two seats—"

"We'll take my car," said Bob. "Where are my keys—?"

“Bob!” Will grabbed the keys off of the counter and tossed them to the man. “Let’s go!”

She snapped back into being right where she’d left. The carpet was soft beneath her feet, the air perfectly warm. Not hot. Not like that hell.

“El! Oh my god, where—where did you go?”

Joyce was by her side in an instant, worry in her eyes. Behind her, Hopper loomed. He was frowning.

A trail of blood ran over her smiling lips. “They’re coming,” she said. And then she collapsed to the floor.